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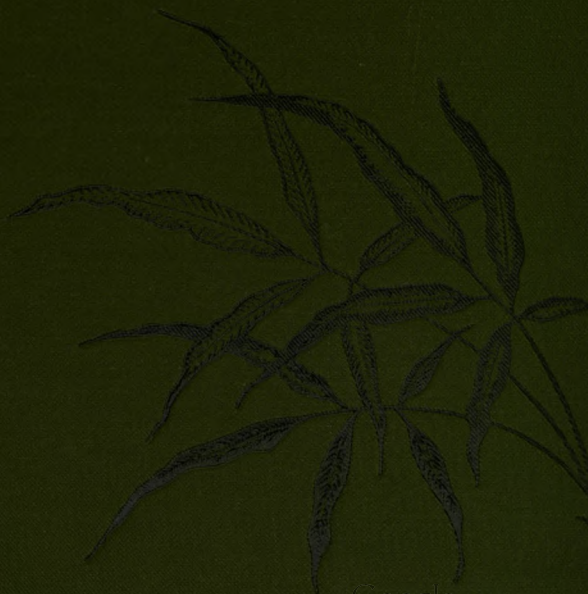
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SELF CONQUEST





"Save for the help of Dulcie's supple young fingers, his baskets would have been too clumsily finished off to find a sale."

Frontispiece.

Page 112.

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SELF-CONQUEST:

The Story of Dulcie Ward.

BY

FLORENCE WILFORD,

Author of "Golden Gorse," "What Friends are meant for," &c.



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SELF-CONQUEST.

CHAPTER I.



“ULCIBELLA WARD?”

The rather unusual name was repeated in a questioning tone, and the Lady Superintendent of a town Sunday-school looked round the class, and not seeing the little girl who generally answered to it, remarked, “This is the second Sunday she has been absent. Do you know if she is ill?”

It was the teacher of the class who was addressed, but before she could reply, a brisk, forward little maiden popped up from the bench, and said eagerly, “No, mum, please, mum, she ain’t ill ; but she’s not coming to school no more, for her father’s sold her.”

There was a great sensation among the

children at this startling announcement, and even the superintendent looked up from her "Attendance Register" in great surprise, while the teacher said gravely, "*Sold* her! What do you mean, Ellen? Are you not making a mistake?"

"No, teacher, please, it's quite true; he have sold her to a circus. Ain't he, Polly?"

"Yes, that he has, teacher," assented Polly, a quiet, matter-of-fact little thing, not likely to run away with a false report; and, thus encouraged, Ellen Heywood added—

"He said he couldn't do with her no longer, because he's got to go all over the country fighting, and she was in his way like; so they've took her at the circus, and they're going to learn her to jump through hoops and——"

"That will do; you can sit down, Ellen," interrupted the superintendent, cutting short further revelations. "I will inquire into this, and let you know what I hear, Miss James;" and she passed on to another class, while Miss James, a kind-hearted young shopwoman, who had taught in the school for many years, began to question her girls on the Gospel for the day.

Little Dulcie Ward, with her bright brown face and great gipsy eyes, had been a very regular and very eager scholar for the last three months, so neither her own teacher nor Miss

Harding, the superintendent, could fail to be interested in the news concerning her.

Miss Harding, a sensible, loving-hearted woman, thought much of her that night, and added to her usual prayer for her Sunday-scholars a special little prayer for Dulcie—that the Heavenly Father would watch over her and shield her from evil, even if the earthly father were forgetting his trust. And the very next morning she set off to the house where the child and her father had been lodging, determined to find out the truth about her.

It was in one of the narrowest back streets of the large town, and its owner was a shoemaker, who pursued his trade in a humble way, without a shop or any outward sign of his calling except a written notice, "John Farmer makes and repairs Boots and Shoes," stuck up in the front window of the ground floor. He and his wife were very poor, but very respectable; and though his pale, pinched face, stooping figure, and short, dry manner were not attractive to strangers, one had only to look at *Mrs.* Farmer to be taken with her at once. She had been a bright, fresh, country girl when John married her, and though she was a woman of five-and-thirty now, and her bloom was a little faded, there was something countrified about her still.

She had not the sallow, drudging look of most of the women in her street, and there was a sweet, frank kindness in her smile, as if she had been used to be on friendly terms with everybody about her, and not to live in a place where it was considered the height of respectability to "keep yourself to yourself," and not know your next door neighbour.

It was John who opened the door when Miss Harding knocked ; and he begged her to walk in and take a chair, saying his wife was at home, and would be down directly.

"She is gone up to speak to that queer lodger of ours—that man Ward," he explained, when Miss Harding was seated. "He's leaving of us to-day, and I can't say I'm sorry for it. We shouldn't have kept him so long only that he's been ill. He's not the kind of lodger we want at all, we never should have taken him in but for the child ; my wife felt a pity for her like, and didn't consider that it was him and not the child we had to look to for the rent."

"It is about the little girl that I came to speak," said Miss Harding ; "she has not been at school the last two Sundays, and one of the children gave me such an odd reason for her absence that it has made me anxious."

"My missus can tell you all about it," said

John Farmer, taking up his work as if it were much too long a story for him to enter upon, and in another minute his "missus" appeared.

She was looking unusually downcast, but she cheered up when she saw the visitor, and began at once to unburden her mind about little Dulcie.

It was too true that the child had been given over to the manager of a circus which had been in the town for the last month, and that he had agreed to pay her father a certain "lump-sum" for her services; but the money had not yet been actually paid, and directly Miss Harding heard *that* she began to see a ray of hope.

"He wants to go and get it now this minute," Mrs. Farmer continued, "and he's just been telling me that he can't pay what he owes us till he gets it. It's put me about terribly, for we can't afford to let him off the rent, and he doesn't deserve that we should, and yet to take the money that is the price of that poor innocent seems to me a downright wicked thing that neither of us could be guilty of."

"I hope you didn't *say* as we wouldn't take it?" said John Farmer, looking round at his tender-hearted, impulsive wife with a doubt not wholly new to him of her being quite as prudent as she was good. "I don't know as we can, but it's a thing that wants looking at on all sides, and one

needs a heap of caution in dealing with a man like that. I'd better have gone up myself."

Mrs. Farmer, who somehow was always left to manage the lodgers, while her husband reserved to himself the right of criticising her way of doing it, was beginning good-humouredly to explain what she *had* said, when, with an apology for interrupting her, Miss Harding rose, and asked to be shown up at once to George Ward's room. "As you say he is going out immediately there is no time to be lost," she said; "and if I can persuade him not to sell his child, he may be able to think of some better mode of paying you."

"Well, he might listen to you, ma'am, though he won't to me," said Mrs. Farmer, hopefully, "but yet I'm almost afraid for you to go nigh him. He's a professional boxer, and a low sort of man, though he's got such good clothes on and such a fine way of speaking that just at first you might take him for a gentleman. He couldn't do you any harm I should think with John in the house, but still——"

"I am not at all afraid," said Miss Harding, with a smile; and in truth, though a gentle, womanly woman, she was afraid of nothing that came to her in the way of duty. "Will you just come up with me and say, 'Here is Miss Harding, the Superintendent of the Sunday-

school ; she wants to speak to you about Dulcie, and then leave me alone with him ?”

“Yes, go, go,” said John to his wife, “the man’s no fool, and he’ll know a lady when he sees one.” So thus encouraged she led the way upstairs, and in answer to a gruff “come in” opened the door and announced the visitor.

George Ward, who was in the act of refreshing himself with a glass of beer from the cupboard before going out, turned sharp round with no very amiable expression of face, but directly he saw the high-bred lady standing in the doorway, as if waiting his leave to come further, his expression changed, and making a very low bow, he drew forward a chair and begged her to be seated. He was a big, showy-looking man, with very good clothes, but far less like Miss Harding’s idea of a gentleman than the shabby cobbler downstairs. Still he was Dulcie’s father, and that was all that mattered to her, so she began very politely to tell him how sorry she was to have missed the little girl from school the last two Sundays, adding, “She is such a bright, willing little scholar that it seems a pity for her not to attend school regularly.”

“Well, you see I have other views for her,” said the man, with a wave of his hand, but not looking altogether displeased at the interest his visitor

showed in the child. "My wife used to speak sometimes, especially towards her lamented end, of the advantages of religious instruction, so, with a natural desire to attend to the wishes of the departed, I took the opportunity of being detained here by illness to send Dulcibella to Sunday-school, and have myself been giving her some lessons of another kind in the week. My engagements, however, do not admit of my remaining in any place for long, and a temporary embarrassment in my affairs makes me unable to do for the child all that her mother may have wished. I have placed her where she will be no expense to me, and where, in fact, I shall be paid for her services. Even the most careful regard for the wishes of the departed must at times give way to circumstances."

"She is with the manager of the circus, is she not?" inquired Miss Harding, thinking it best to come straight to the point.

He looked half inclined to deny the fact, but on second thoughts admitted it, and proceeded to explain in very fine language that this particular circus was superior to all other circuses, and this manager to all other managers, and ended by entreating that Miss Harding would not allow "prejudice" to influence her in judging of the provision he had made for his daughter.

"I don't think I have any particular prejudice against circus managers; I daresay they often have a great deal of good in them," she answered, "and I think you care too much for your little girl to have placed her where she would be ill-used. But you seem to admit that the arrangement is not quite what her mother would have liked, so will you let me propose another plan for her?"

He made a sort of bow, and she went on.

"I think it would be quite possible to find a respectable couple—perhaps even the good people downstairs—who would take your child to board with them for a small weekly payment, and let her attend school regularly. Perhaps, as you speak of being a little embarrassed just now, you are not prepared for this expense, but if you could engage to pay a shilling a week towards it, I would for the next three months make up the necessary sum out of my own pocket. At the end of that time your circumstances may have improved, and you may be able to arrange to pay it all yourself. It will be but for three or four years, for Dulcie is ten now, is she not? And as soon as she is thirteen or fourteen it will be quite possible to get some respectable little place for her, where she will be boarded free of expense, and will earn enough wages to keep herself in clothes."

"And forget all her learning in household

drudgery!" exclaimed this queer father, in a tone of supreme contempt. "That is scarcely a fate that I can desire for my offspring."

"That would depend on what sort of place it was," said Miss Harding, quietly. "If I had any hand in getting it for her I should try to take care that she was not made into a drudge. But of course there would be no need for her to go to service so young, or at all, in fact, if you did not wish it. There are so many openings in England now for men with your strength and intelligence, especially in a town like this, with its large dockyard and many factories, that I should think you could earn enough with ease to keep both her and yourself in comfort."

He gave Miss Harding a curious glance out of the corners of his eyes, which seemed to say that if she thought he was going to leave his roving life and settle down as a dockyard or factory labourer she was woefully mistaken, but as she kept an unmoved countenance and waited for him to speak, he presently observed, "I was not born to labour, madam. I have seen better days, as the saying is, but let that pass. What I wish to explain is that the people downstairs, whom you justly describe as 'good,' are like other good people, not indifferent about money, and that I have no means of satisfying their claims in the

matter of rent except through the little advance my friend the manager is about to make to me in consideration of Dulcibella's services. I might, it is true, contrive to leave the place without paying them, but I am a man of honour, so that course would be impossible to me."

He looked full at her as he spoke, and if he had seen in her face any satirical want of belief in the honour he boasted of, she would have forfeited for ever the possibility of influencing him, but she met his gaze with grave, straightforward simplicity, and answered at once, "Yes, indeed, I am sure it would ; but leaving that out of the question, let us consider what can be done. Have you no friend who could lend you the money?"

"I have not a friend in the place, madam, with the exception of my friend the manager, and if I withdraw Dulcie, there will naturally be a little soreness of feeling which will make it impossible to ask for a loan in *that* quarter."

"But you spoke of having an engagement. Would not the people who have engaged you make you an advance if you applied to them?"

"For my travelling expenses, yes, madam ; they have already done so, but I could not ask anything further. If you were acquainted with the

rules of my profession this would be clear to you at once."

She longed to tell him what she thought of his profession, but her good sense told her that this would be no sort of use, at any rate in the present stage of their acquaintance, so she merely said, "If you don't mind telling me how much you owe I will see if I can lend you enough to satisfy the Farmers. I have already given you a proof of my trust in asking you to leave Dulcie on my hands as it were, with merely an understanding between us that you shall pay a trifle weekly for the present, and the full cost of her board as soon as you are able to do so, and now I am quite willing to trust you further. I do not take the liberty of offering you charity, I simply offer you a loan which you can repay by instalments, and I hope the fact of my being Dulcie's friend gives me the right to do this."

"It would, I am sure, have been a satisfaction to my late wife to know that Dulcie would find such a friend," said the man politely. "With regard to my temporary embarrassment it stands, I think, at about the figure of £3 8s.; that is, £1 6s. for a quarter's rent, and £2 2s. for various articles of food which Mrs. Farmer procured for me when I was ill. She has not actually laid out the whole of that sum, but articles to

that amount were procured on her credit, and as a man of honour I must enable her to meet the accounts when they become due."

"Well, suppose I lend you enough to cover the rent and what she has actually spent for you, and that you send her the rest as soon as you possibly can? I have not the money with me, but I will go home and get it; and would it not be best for me to go to the circus and ask for Dulcie? If you would give me authority to bring her away I think I could manage it without difficulty, and perhaps without giving rise to that soreness you spoke of. You are accustomed to write, no doubt? If you will write a note to the manager now at once, I will go down and speak to Mrs. Farmer meanwhile. As you know her, and as she is what she is, I think perhaps you would rather leave Dulcie with her than with any one else."

"Your kindness and energy, madam, leave me breathless with admiration," said the man, half impudently and yet half sincerely. "I could trust my child to Mrs. Farmer with perfect confidence; and with regard to the bringing her away, I think you will find my friend perfectly civil; he is always anxious for the patronage of the higher classes. But one difficulty strikes me; when I left Dulcibella at the

circus, I described her new life to her in glowing colours, and I do not feel at all certain that she will be willing to leave it. I ought, perhaps, to tell you that she has great strength of character, inherited, I think, more from me than from her deceased mother, who was not a person of much determination."

Miss Harding could well believe that this was true, and a vision—curiously like the reality—rose before her of Dulcie's mother, a weak, fond, impulsive woman, who had been led away from better things by her vagrant husband, and had sunk into almost degradation, while yet retaining sufficient right feeling to wish to see her child rescued from the life of ignorance and sin which seemed to lay before her. It was plain that the man had more stuff in him, and that he had not been sorry to be shown a way of keeping his promise to his dying wife without too much personal inconvenience. Such conscience as he possessed had not been at ease in leaving Dulcie at the circus, and therefore it had been a comparatively easy task to persuade him to recall her. It was quite possible that she might, as he foretold, object with all the force of her wilful little will to being brought away ; but long experience and great tenderness of heart had shown Miss Harding how to deal with self-willed chil-

dren, and so she persevered in her offer of going to fetch Dulcie, and, leaving George to write his note, went downstairs to speak to Mrs. Farmer.

The way had been smoothed for the proposal she was about to make by a conversation that the husband and wife had had together while she was upstairs, and when she mentioned that the father could at present only afford a shilling a week, but that she would herself make up whatever they thought a fair price for Dulcie's board, and would also pay for her schooling, Mrs. Farmer rejoined, "O ma'am, if you will pay the school pence it will be quite sufficient. I've been talking to John, and telling him how dearly I should like to have the child—you know I've never had one of my own—and he's so good to me he's given me leave. You see if we was to charge for her board her father ought to be the one to pay it, and he might get tired of it any day, or want to put her somewhere that he thought was cheaper, and so she might be taken from us just as we were getting her into nice ways. But if we keep her for nothing I believe he'll be *glad* to leave her with us, and yet I don't think but what he cares enough for her not to abandon her altogether. If he's willing to give the shilling a week it'll cover her clothes nicely, and John *did* say as Mr. Ward must pay

for them. I've had a good deal of trouble in persuading him, for you see, ma'am, our means are very small; but there! a child doesn't eat much, and perhaps I can save on my own clothes and such like, and anyhow, I think God'll reward him for kindness to a motherless child."

Of her *own* kindness she never thought, and in truth, in offering to take Dulcie for nothing she was but doing what she had been longing to do ever since she found that Ward wanted to get rid of her. "But I never can be thankful enough to you, ma'am," she went on, "for saving that dear child from the circus. 'Tis a low one I'm told, and the manager's wife a drinking sort of woman. Mr. Ward took Dulcie there without a word to me, and nothing I could say would persuade him to fetch her back again. I shouldn't have known where she was gone only that some children down street that she used to play with saw her there all dressed up like, and then came and told me."

"We mustn't make sure that she is saved from the circus till I actually bring her back with me," said Miss Harding, but nevertheless, when she left the house with George Ward's note in her pocket, she felt with God's help her errand would be a successful one, and so it proved.



CHAPTER II.



AND thus Dulcie came back to the little house in North Street, no longer as a lodger, but as the adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Farmer, though neither of them required of her that she should call them father and mother. Of her own accord she began to call Mrs. Farmer "aunt," but only shook her dark locks and made a face when it was proposed that she should address the shoemaker as "uncle." She had not yet learned to care for him, and was, in fact, far from delighted at the arrangement that had been made for her. She had stayed just long enough at the circus to gain a taste for being dressed up in pink glazed lining and white tarlatane and spangles, for listening to the clown's foolish jests, and watching the antics of "Master Charles," the wonderful boy, who could dance a jig on horseback; and at the same time she had had no experience of the many hardships of that way of life, the tediousness of going over

the same things day after day, the close, bad air of the vans in which she would have had to travel, the general misery when the circus failed to draw a crowd, and the manager was venting his disappointment and ill-temper on each member of his company.

She was really fond of Mrs. Farmer, and she did not altogether dislike attending school, for she was too quick and clever to find learning any trouble ; but she hated discipline in any form, and having been much praised for her quickness at the circus, and made conscious that she was graceful and taking, and that she looked to advantage when dressed up, she did not at all relish being silenced or reprov'd, or required to be neat and plain in her dress, and keep her curly hair in order. Mrs. Farmer, without cutting any of it off, had taken out its tangles, and now gave it a good brushing every morning, and tied it back neatly with a piece of dark blue ribbon ; but one of Dulcie's favourite tricks was to untie the ribbon directly she got to school, and let the thick curly mane fall over her face and neck in wild confusion, greatly to the injury of her copy-book, which was sure to get smeared, while the ink was wet, by the curls dangling over it. This and taking a necklace out of her pocket, and putting it on when the school-

mistress was not looking, were her favourite amusements during the first few mornings ; but at the end of a week the mistress called on Mrs. Farmer, and asked her to send Dulcie to school more tidy, and not let her wear beads round her neck, so then these little tricks of hers came to light, and were kindly but firmly put an end to. As Dulcie said her father had given her the necklace, Mrs. Farmer would not take it away altogether, but she insisted that it should be left in her keeping during school-time, and only worn of an evening, and not out of doors even then, a regulation which the child thought rather cruel, as it took from her all opportunity of showing it off. Her whole wardrobe wanted reform, it was such a mixture of smartness and dirt and raggedness, but as Mrs. Farmer could not afford to buy her many new clothes, she contented herself with washing and mending the old ones, and making some large holland pinafores to be worn at school, which covered up a good deal of the faded finery. As nearly all the other little girls wore pinafores too, Dulcie could not well object to this, but she took a mischievous delight in splashing these sober garments with ink or mud, and when she was no longer allowed to pull the ribbon out of her hair, would give it such a vicious tug now and then that it

was soon reduced to the appearance of a mere crumpled string, till at last Mrs. Farmer remarked sorrowfully to her husband that it would take nearly fourpence a week to keep Dulcie in hair-ribbon. Of course the cobbler remonstrated against such extravagance, so the next time the ribbon came home unwearable Mrs. Farmer hardened her heart, tied back the brown locks firmly with a piece of black tape, and said in her most decided tones that no fresh ribbon should be bought till Dulcie would promise to take proper care of it. The child went back to school in a rage, tore off the bit of tape on the way, and threw it into the gutter, pouted when the pupil-teacher told her to put her hair out of her eyes, allowed it to fall over her writing, showed up a blotted copy, got punished for carelessness, and went home determined to run away to her friends at the circus as soon as she could find out where they had gone. It was fortunate that they had left the town a few days after Miss Harding had brought her away, otherwise she would certainly have fled to them then and there.

She felt so sore and angry, and was so convinced she was horribly ill-used, that if Mrs. Farmer had greeted her by remarks on her untidiness and inquiries after the piece of tape, she would certainly have forgotten all that she

owed her, and treated her to a storm of the wildest passion of which her little ill-trained nature was capable ; but the shoemaker's wife had the wisdom which comes of great tenderness and a keen perception of what others feel, and so, without appearing to notice the untidy wig, she said pleasantly, " Who do you think has been here this afternoon ? Miss Harding ; and she asked after you ; and when Michaelmas comes you're to go there to tea. Her cook's got a little orphan niece at boarding-school, and Miss Harding's given her leave to have her to stay for a week's holiday at Michaelmas, and she thinks you'll like to go and have tea with her some evening and play some games."

" Then I must have some ribbon for my hair ; I can't go *there* with nasty black tape ! " was the first thing Dulcie said ; and John Farmer's dry " You won't go at all, my lass, if you don't behave yourself a little better," only made her brow darker than before ; but Mrs. Farmer said quietly, " We'll leave talking about that till the time comes ; take off your hat, and set the tea-things now. Your uncle's in a hurry for his tea this afternoon."

Setting out the tea-cups was one of the things that Dulcie liked. She had been used to doing all that sort of thing for her father, though not in quite so neat a way as Mrs. Farmer required.

She bustled about and made all ready without any further signs of ill-temper, and nothing more was said on the subject of her grievance till she went up to bed. Instead of leaving her to go up alone as usual Mrs. Farmer went with her, and when they were in the tiny bedroom—inside Mr. and Mrs. Farmer's—which Dulcie was allowed to call her own, she said kindly, "I'll brush out your hair for you to-night ; you've got it quite in a tangle again, and if you pull and tear at it you'll hurt yourself above a bit. Take off your frock, and bring me the brush and comb."

She sat down as she spoke, and Dulcie did as she was bid, half fearing a lecture was coming, but not liking to grumble or rebel when "aunt" was so kind. Presently, when she was standing at her knee and the thick tangles of hair were in the skilful, motherly hands, Mrs. Farmer began, not at all in an accusing tone, but simply in one of straightforward inquiry, "What have you done with the piece of tape that I tied round it at dinner-time?"

Dulcie felt inclined to say that she had lost it, but already her intercourse with this honest, truthful woman and the things she had learnt at Sunday-school had made her ashamed to tell a falsehood, so in a tone that was half abashed, though it struggled to be defiant, she answered

candidly, "I took it off as soon as I got down street, and threw it away."

"Before you got into school?"

"Yes, aunt."

Mrs. Farmer had just come to a particularly awkward tangle, and instead of giving it an impatient wrench with the comb, as Dulcie's mother had sometimes done in old days, she began to work away at it so gently and carefully, that the child, who knew well she had deserved displeasure, twisted her head round and looked at her in surprise.

"Keep quiet, my dear," she said then, still without any tone of anger, "I can't talk to you much till I've got the better of these tangles, but I want you to think whether I didn't promise your governess in your hearing that you should go to school tidy, and whether I didn't tell you yourself that you must keep your hair as I put it, and that I couldn't and wouldn't have it hang about like a gipsy's."

Dulcie began to wriggle impatiently, but as her hair was in Mrs. Farmer's hand she could not get away, nor even go on wriggling without hurting herself very considerably. "It all hung down like this at the circus, and one night I had a wreath of pink roses on it!" she said, in an injured tone.

If this had been said to Miss Harding she would have known how to make allowances for the charm that the flowing locks and gay artificial wreath had had in Dulcie's childish eyes ; but Mrs. Farmer, with all her wisdom and sweetness, could not understand the attraction of anything which to her thinking did not look *respectable*, and so answered, almost as drily as her husband might have done, "I'm glad I didn't see you. You must have looked just like one of the chimney-sweeps on May Day."

"I didn't, I didn't!" said Dulcie, stamping her foot with indignation, and pulling away from the comb to her own great agony. "Can't I go to bed as I am? You do hurt me so."

"Hush, it'll soon be done, you're a-hurting yourself," said Mrs. Farmer, still patient and kind, spite of this new aggravation. "Just you stand steady, and I'll be as quick as ever I can. You must keep the string in your hair to-morrow and then there'll be no tangles to pull out."

"I will if you'll get me a new blue ribbon, and I'll promise not to spoil it any more," said Dulcie, making as she thought a great concession. "I daresay I can make it last a long time if I try, and you know you only said I shouldn't have ribbon till I would promise to take care of it."

"I know I did, and if you'd been an obedient girl this afternoon and kept your hair as I put it, and then come and told me nicely that you were sorry for having messed up your ribbon this morning and been so wilful, I'd have gone out and bought you a bit of blue to-night; but it won't do to spoil you, for that's no kindness, so you must just do with a bit of the black shoe-ribbon for the present. I'll get you some blue before Michaelmas Day, and let you wear it on Sundays and such like."

"I don't want any nasty black shoe-ribbon," rejoined Dulcie, passionately. "I shan't wear it, I shall throw it in the gutter as I did the tape!"

Mrs. Farmer paused for an instant before replying, then she said quite gently, "I don't think you will, for that would oblige me to punish you; I couldn't look over such wilfulness twice."

If this had been said in a loud, cross, threatening tone it would only have made matters worse, but spoken in that gravely warning voice it did serve as a check to Dulcie's passion, and made her silent, though she was still pouting and angry.

Somehow she knew by instinct Mrs. Farmer's principle in dealing with her quite as well as if she had heard it carefully explained. There

was to be great love and kindness, she was never to be driven to rebellion by ill-usage, but still her faults were not to be encouraged, and she was not to be allowed to get the upper hand. "Aunt wants to make me good," said Dulcie to herself, with a little private wonder as to whether the thing were possible, and though she was not at all sure that she would not prefer remaining naughty, she began to see that there might be difficulties about it in the face of Mrs. Farmer's gentle but determined will.

When she knelt down by-and-by to say the evening prayer that she had been lately taught, with her hair all smooth and comfortable, and a pleasant feeling on her red lips, where a motherly kiss had just been left, she had forgotten all about her wish to run away to the circus, and when she came to the words, "forgive me the wrong things I have done this day," there *was* something like sorrow in her heart, though what pricked her most was a kind of notion that she had been ungrateful and ungracious, and that if she had but said to Mrs. Farmer, "I'm sorry I vexed you, I'll be a good girl to-morrow," it would have made up for a great deal of her previous ill-behaviour, and enabled her to go to sleep at peace with herself. It was quite tiresome to find that one could not be naughty and

stubborn without putting oneself in the wrong and making one feel uncomfortable !

A piece of the stout black ribbon which John Farmer used for shoe-strings was duly produced the next day, and Dulcie wisely endured to have it put on and left it undisturbed. This little matter of the hair ribbon had been thoroughly settled once for all, though there were a great many other things in which she was still wilful and provoking. When Michaelmas Day came, John privately told his wife that "he didn't think the little lass in the least deserved to go to Miss Harding's, and that he didn't hold with giving treats to those who couldn't behave themselves;" but Mrs. Farmer pleaded, "Oh, please, John, let her go. Sometimes the things we *haven't* deserved come the most sweet to us, and do us the most good."

George Ward, when he took himself off in the afternoon of the very day that Dulcie came back from the circus, had said grandly to his little girl, "Good-bye, my child ; my mind is at rest about you, since I leave you in the arms of a second mother." And certainly, though she did not know it, the "second mother" could well bear comparison with the first.



CHAPTER III.

DULCIE looked a neat, bright little maiden, very different from the wild ragged creature that she had been when Miss Harding first made her acquaintance, as she stood at the back-door of her kind friend's house, waiting to be admitted on the afternoon of Michaelmas Day. The cook answered the bell, and took her at once into a pleasant little sitting-room adjoining the kitchen, where the parlour-maid was busy with needle-work, and where a fair-haired child of nine, who also had some sewing in her hand, started up as if to give an eager welcome, and then hung back with sudden shyness without uttering a word.

"There now, Lucy, don't be so fearsome," remonstrated the cook; "here's little Dulcie Ward come to play with you, and when she's taken off her hat you may show her the doll's house on the landing, Miss Harding says, and have a game with it, only you must mind and not be rough."

Lucy, who did not look as if she had any roughness in her, said, "Yes, aunt," very submissively, and drew near her guest, as if to help her in taking off her outdoor things, but it was not until the two children had gone upstairs together and were quite out of hearing of the servants that they began to recover the use of their tongues. Dulcie, who was not at all shy, had been looking about freely, taking in everything at a glance, but Lucy's extreme gentleness and timidity made her feel constrained, and even when they stood in front of the doll's house—a two-storied little building with glazed windows and sloping roof, and chimneys and all complete—which stood on a low table in an alcove on the second landing, she gazed at first in silence, and waited to see if Lucy would speak before exclaiming, "Well, 'tis a pretty house, with them little balconies and all ; but how do the dolls get in and out ? I don't see no handle to the door."

"The front comes off," said Lucy, with a little titter of amusement at the idea of the dolls letting themselves out and in. "See, there's a hook at each side. I'll take it off in a minute if you'll help me ; but I want you to look in at the windows first, and see the ladies having their tea."

Dulcie pressed her face against one of the three small windows towards which Lucy pointed,

and thus obtained a somewhat misty view of a gorgeous drawing-room—all on a tiny scale—where small dolls in blue satin and white muslin were grouped round a centre-table, with china tea-cups as big as their heads standing in front of them, while before one of them was placed a teapot and milk-jug, so tall that they nearly touched the chandelier which hung down from the ceiling. To the child, who had never seen a real drawing-room in her life, it seemed very grand indeed. “Why, it’s something like the circus,” she said, by way of making a thoroughly flattering comparison.

But Lucy’s titter had a sound of contempt in it this time. “The circus!” she replied; “they’re *ladies*. Just look at their nice dresses. And they’ve got servants to wait on them. If you’ll help me take off the front I’ll show you the cook in the kitchen, and there’s a dresser there and everything, and a frying-pan and a salt-box!”

When the front had been carefully lifted off all these wonders stood revealed, and Dulcie studied the contents of each of the four rooms with the fresh interest of ten years old, taking each doll in her hands to look at it the better, and even insisting on routing out the “sick lady” in the grand pink bed, regardless of Lucy’s assurances that she was “sewed in!”

"O my! it *is* pretty," she said at last, "but whatever does Miss Harding have it for? She don't play with it, does she?"

"Play with it! no; why, she's quite old. I mean," added Lucy, colouring, as if afraid she had said something disrespectful, "she's quite a grown-up lady, so of course she doesn't play. But aunt says this baby-house belonged to Miss Ella and Miss Marion Harding when they were little girls, and one of them is dead and the other's married and gone to India, so Miss Harding keeps it for their sakes like. And she often has little ladies to tea and lets them play with it, and you and me may play with it if we ain't rough."

She proceeded to bring the doll housemaid upstairs to clear away the tea, and invited her guest to help her, but Dulcie's notions of "play" were something so much wilder and more boisterous than this that she only shook her head, and clasping her hands behind her neck, under her thick cloud of hair, stood looking on silently and critically with her dark eyes full of thought. She had a natural love of beauty, of ornament and colour, and all the surroundings of her life had been so sordid and ugly that never had she seen anything to gratify her taste except in shop windows or at the circus. That it was

possible to have a pretty *home*, and that there were people who wore pretty dresses all day, and did not only put them on when they were going to jump through hoops or dance on the tight rope, was now dawning upon her for the first time. "I shall be a lady, that's what *I* shall be," she said to herself, and she already saw herself, in imagination, dressed in white muslin and lace, sitting on a crimson satin sofa like the one in the doll's house, with a glass chandelier hanging over her head. How silly Lucy would have thought her if she could have seen into her mind ; but some one came home presently who understood her much better than Lucy, and after tea—a cosy, comfortable meal, with plenty of hot cakes as a treat for the two little girls—she was sent for into the drawing-room to speak to Miss Harding. It was somewhat of a disappointment to find that the furniture there was not crimson satin, and that there was nothing grander in the way of lights than a simple bronze lamp on the table, but the fresh chintz coverings of the sofa and chairs were undeniably pretty, and there were some beautiful pictures on the walls, in "real gold" frames as she fondly believed, though the picture-framer could have told a different story. Miss Harding was sitting on a low chair near the table, and she made Dulcie

come and sit beside her, and began by reading her part of a letter which she had that day received from her father. George Ward had sent a post-office order for the shilling a week he had engaged to pay for Dulcie's dress, calculated up to Michaelmas, and had also sent a pound over, which he said might either be given to Mrs. Farmer, to cover what she had bought for him, or might go towards repaying the advance which had been made to him by Miss Harding. His kind creditor decided at once that it should go to Mrs. Farmer, but was pleased to find that he had so far not abused her trust in him, and anxious to give Dulcie the full benefit of the few fatherly expressions which his letter contained. He said—for it was all in very fine language—that he sent his love to his little daughter, and hoped she was making great progress in her studies, and endeavouring to fit herself either for superior service or for some other useful career.

“What's ‘superior service’?” asked Dulcie, with her eyes very wide open.

“To be servant in a gentleman's family; I suppose your father means; and indeed, Dulcie, if you will not only take pains at school and learn to speak nicely, but will let Mrs. Farmer train you in neat, nice ways at home, I may be able to get you a place as under-nurse or under-housemaid

in some family where you will have the chance of learning to be a thoroughly good servant."

"I don't mean to be a servant, ma'am," said the child abruptly, putting in "ma'am" as an after-thought; "I mean to be a schoolmistress, and have the prettiest little house you ever saw."

This rather took Miss Harding's breath away, for considering that six months back Dulcie did not even know her letters, and that altogether she had had far less advantages than most of the school-children, the vocation of a teacher was about the last she would have thought of for her.

"I'm afraid it is not quite so easy to be a schoolmistress as you think," she answered, smiling. "There is a great deal to be learnt first; and hard examinations have to be passed, and a girl has to be very satisfactory in conduct before she can even be a pupil-teacher, which is the first step."

"I can learn very well if I've a mind," said Dulcie, with a little nod of her head, "and I allers get the good conduct marks in Sunday-school, and could in the week too if I chose. Yes, please 'm, I mean to be a gov'ness, and have a plum-coloured merino dress, and a collar and a brooch, and be called *Miss Ward*."

Miss Harding could not help being amused at

the ambitious nature of the little maid's day-dreams, but at any rate it was a worthier ambition than that of being a "columbine" at a circus, and she did not wish to check the child's ready confidences by anything like blame.

"I'm afraid it is very hard work," she said. "Miss Pearce often looks very tired, doesn't she? And when you girls are naughty it is disagreeable work too. Do you think it is only having a nice little house to herself, and being treated with respect, that makes her go on with it all so cheerfully?"

"I don't know," said Dulcie, as if she were puzzled to think what else it could be.

"No, I have known Miss Pearce since she was quite a little girl like you; and I think she has always had in her heart a great wish to do some real work for our Lord, so I think it is the feeling that she is working for Him which keeps her face so bright. Do you remember our reading in the Epistle at school, a Sunday or two ago, all that St. Paul went through in trying to teach people about our Lord, and how he did not seem to mind it a bit because it was borne for Christ's sake? I think everybody who is working for God, even in little ways, feels the same more or less; *they* don't mind the disagreeables, but other people do."

"But God doesn't care whether gov'ness learns

us to spell right," objected Dulcie, who looked upon week-day school-teaching as not a much higher thing *in itself* than her father's profession of boxing.

"Yes, I think He does ; for spelling is a step to reading, and that makes you able to read His Holy Bible and to follow the psalms and prayers at church and to learn many things which are of use both to yourself and others. And then it isn't only lessons which your governess teaches, she trains you in orderly, obedient ways, helps to make good girls of you."

"Sometimes she punishes us," said Dulcie, with rather a lowering brow ; "if I was gov'ness I wouldn't never punish anybody ; but I'd make them mind somehow."

There was such determination in her face as she uttered the last words that Miss Harding felt a child with so much force of character might really one day be fitted to rule others, if only in the meantime she could be taught to rule herself.

"Now, Dulcie," she said, taking the little brown hand in hers, "I don't promise to think anything at present of your wish to be a school-mistress, nor to say anything to your father about it, but if in a year's time you're of the same mind, and if by then you have got over

your backwardness, and are in the class with other girls of your age, I will begin to think about it and to do what I can to help you on. At thirteen—only three years from now—you could be a candidate, as it is called, preparing for examination ; at fourteen, if you passed, you might be a pupil-teacher. And so you would go on working your way up ; but you have a great deal to do before you can even *begin*. You have to learn to behave well and to speak well, besides getting on with lessons.”

“Father speaks beautiful,” said the child, “he never uses common words except when he’s drunk. Aunt and Mr. Farmer don’t speak half so beautiful as him.”

“As he,” corrected Miss Harding, with a smile ; “well, I shall be quite content if in a year’s time you speak as nicely as Mrs. Farmer. I should like you to be like her altogether, for she is one of the best people I know, and does her work for God quite as truly as Miss Pearce. You learnt to-day, perhaps, in the collect at school, about the Holy Angels ‘always doing God service in heaven.’ Isn’t it a nice thought that there are people on earth who are trying *always* to serve Him too ? You say the Lord’s Prayer every night and morning now, don’t you ? and you know we ask Him in that

that 'His will may be done on earth as it is in Heaven.' None of us are too young to begin to try to do it."

Dulcie's eyes showed how intelligently she followed her friend's meaning; wild little thing as she was in some ways, there was a certain thoughtfulness in her, and a readiness to understand all that was good and true, which made her more quick at taking in new ideas than many better-behaved children.

"I'm going to begin now," she said, "I won't never be rough and rude no more. I'm going to be a lady some day, and ladies never do wrong I s'pose, do they?"

How heartily Miss Harding wished that this were so! but she had not fully the key to the train of thought which had begun in the doll's house; and fearing that George Ward or his wife might have given the little girl some foolish idea of marrying a gentleman, she said rather anxiously, "Indeed ladies have faults to battle with just like other people; but what makes you think you are going to be a lady some day?"

"It was the dolls," said Dulcie, with a little eager sigh. "I *should* like to sit up pretty as they do, and have a pianner, and company to tea! So when I've been gov'ness a long time and saved up a lot o' money, I shall buy a beautiful house,

and Mrs. Farmer shall come and live with me ; but I won't have *Mr.* Farmer, and father shall only come when he's got his best clothes on."

It was a silly little dream enough, and some people would have told the child so bluntly ; but Miss Harding contented herself with saying, "I think if I were you I should make my father and Mr. Farmer welcome, whatever sort of house I had." And then, gently putting aside the subject, bade the little girl call Lucy, as she wanted to show them both some pictures, and tell them a little of the meaning of Michaelmas Day.

But by-and-by, when she had told them of some of the ministries of love which the angels exercise on earth, and had shown them a beautiful engraving of the angel delivering St. Peter from prison, and some other Scripture prints, she went on to give them a description, drawn from the Bible, of the holy Home above, where the angels live. She wanted to fill little Dulcie's active imagination with the golden streets and gates of pearl, the city which needs no sun to shine in it because "the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the light thereof," thinking *this* the best way to quench the too eager desire for a beautiful earthly home, and to show the little heart that its vague yearnings after all that was most lovely might be satisfied some day.



CHAPTER IV.

THERE had really been some earnest purpose in Dulcie's expressed determination not to be rough and rude any more, and though in this, like all her other good resolves, she trusted too much to *self*, and so broke down terribly now and then, much to her own annoyance, there was *on the whole* a marked change in her from that afternoon she spent at Miss Harding's. When Mrs. Farmer told the cook so, cook was fully persuaded that it was the example of her niece Lucy that had wrought the change, an idea which Dulcie herself would have been the first to scout ; but it was in truth due to such a mixture of high motives and poor ones, of longing to please Him whom she had so lately learnt to know, and longing to have the things on which her own little heart was set, that a far closer observer than cook would have been puzzled to assign the true cause for it. There were tares and wheat growing together in Dulcie's

soul, but He who of old gave the warning against the hasty uprooting of the tares, "lest ye root up also the wheat with them," bore with this mingling of good and evil for the time, and was granting the child light and courage by degrees to discern the weeds from the grain and to pull them up one by one. The good was steadily though slowly conquering, but the evil still held its ground, and sometimes one fault seemed rather to be driven out by another than overcome in the way those who loved her could have wished.

She steadily kept to her desire of being a schoolmistress, and it was wonderful what pains she took with her lessons, and how quickly she made up for her backwardness and got into the class with girls who had been at school ever since they were three years old. "There isn't such another girl in the school for quickness as Dulcie Ward," Miss Pearce said privately to Miss Harding; "and she pays so much attention to grammar now, and has learnt to speak so much better; I daresay you've noticed it, haven't you, ma'am? I scarcely thought we could have had her up for examination this spring, such a dunce as she was when she came to school first, but she's got on so wonderfully that I mean to let her try. She won't lose marks by shyness, at any rate. I don't suppose she'll be a bit more

afraid of the Inspector than she is of me. She never loses her chance of answering at the catechising when the vicar's questions are about anything that she knows."

"Has she ever told you what she wishes to be?" Miss Harding asked. But no, Miss Pearce knew nothing; and by-and-by Miss Harding found that neither Dulcie's Sunday-school teacher nor Mrs. Farmer had been taken into her confidence, so it was plain that the child had a certain shyness and reserve of her own, though she was not shy in the common sense of the word. She was very proud, too, and now that she had got a sort of idea of making a lady of herself, her pride helped her to throw off some of her old bad habits. She had been used to linger on her way home from school to play with "the low boys down street," as Mrs. Farmer called them, but now she broke away from them altogether, and though they often tried to entice her into a game, and though in her secret heart she did sometimes long for some real rough play, she always now marched steadily on, with her lips closed firmly, and her head held a little high. One day that they had pestered her more than usual to play with them, and on her refusal had actually thrown stones at her, one of which had hit her on the temple, she ran in crying,

and when her grievance had been explained was not only pitied by kind Mrs. Farmer, but much praised for her firmness and proper behaviour.

"You shall have some treacle with your tea this afternoon," wound up the good woman, "for you've been a very good girl lately, a very good girl indeed you have. It used to vex me very much to see you romping with those rude boys, and I'm quite pleased to see that you've attended to what I said, and that you don't have any more to say to them."

Dulcie dried her tears and accepted readily the large slice of bread and treacle which was presently handed to her, but paused between each bite and looked about her as if she were turning over something in her mind; at last, when it was nearly all gone, she laid down the remaining bit and said suddenly, "I didn't leave off playing with the boys because you told me to; I left off because I didn't choose to speak to them any more."

"Don't you be so saucy," said John Farmer directly, in his sharpest tone, and his kind wife looked up a little troubled, plainly seeing in the girl's speech as he did a declaration of independence; but Dulcie finished off her bread and treacle with a freer conscience, feeling that she was no longer taking credit which was not her

due. The unexpected, undeserved praise and reward had shown her something of her own motives, and though she could not have put it into words, she did *feel* that it would have been nicer if she had kept away from the rude boys out of obedience and not out of pride. There was some mingling of this better reason in her avoidance of them for the future, and altogether she began to find pleasure in trying to do what Mrs. Farmer liked. It was nice to see what a gentle, satisfied look came over her face whenever she was allowed to help the good woman in any way, and how she would even sit down to needlework contentedly—an occupation which she particularly disliked—when Mrs. Farmer said, in her cheerful tones, “Come, let’s do a bit of sewing together this evening,” and allowed her to draw her chair as close up to hers as it could possibly go. Strangers who saw them shopping together on Saturdays, or sitting side by side in church on Sunday evenings—in the morning Dulcie sat with the school—took them for mother and daughter, and now that the girl was growing fast, and taking pains to be neat and quiet, she did, indeed, look much more as if she belonged to the tall, slender, gentle woman whom everybody respected, than she had looked at the time of her adoption. There was a sort of like-

ness springing up between them in more ways than one. Christmas went by—a very different Christmas to any that Dulcie had passed before—and after a while came Lent and an early Easter ; and, in Easter week, a day of which Dulcie thought a great deal both beforehand and when it actually arrived, namely, her eleventh birthday. The first thing she saw standing by her bed when she awoke was a new pair of boots, the nicest she had ever had, and when she found that they were a present from John, and that he had made them for her himself, she actually ran to him at breakfast-time and kissed him of her own accord, a proceeding which gave him a great deal of pleasure, though he pretended that she had nearly knocked off his spectacles by “catching hold of him so sudden.” Then there were a nice little workbag and a cover for Dulcie’s beautiful new Bible (given her by her teacher at Christmas), as presents from Mrs. Farmer ; and when the Bible, which had been hitherto kept in paper, was produced after breakfast to have its nice cover fitted on, John was invited to sit down again for a few minutes to hear Dulcie read a chapter. She had been accustomed to read a few verses to Mrs. Farmer every day during the last two or three months, ever since she had been able to read at all, in fact ; but to have the

shoemaker sitting down on a week-day morning to listen to her seemed such a solemn and wonderful event that she read the chapter she had herself chosen—the 21st of St. John's Gospel—with as much care as if the vicar himself had been listening to her, and even felt her voice tremble a little now and then. There was no school during Easter week, so afterwards she helped Mrs. Farmer to wash up the breakfast things and tidy the upstairs rooms, including the lodger's—a single man, whom Mrs. Farmer “did for”—and then was allowed to assist in preparing for dinner, and even to have a finger in the rhubarb pudding which in honour of the birthday was to be added to the usual homely meal. She was as happy as possible all the morning, and she thought that perhaps when the country post came in at mid-day it might bring her a letter from her father, of whom nothing had been heard since Christmas. He had then sent the remainder of the money he owed, and had pledged himself to continue the shilling a week for Dulcie's clothes, adding, that he might also be able, when times were good, to “send her a present now and again.” Dulcie thought a great deal of this promise, and when the next quarter-day came without bringing any money, she said he must be wait-

ing for her birthday, which was then close at hand. Now that the birthday was come, she felt quite sure of hearing from him, and kept wondering to herself while she swept and dusted, and helped with the cooking, what the present would be like, whether it would be money or something to wear. "I hope it'll be money," she said to herself, "for aunt don't like just the sort of things that father would buy; and, besides, if he was to send me as much as five shillings, I might buy her a new ribbon for her bonnet, and still have enough for a new hat for myself. She hasn't got a bit of anything bright for Easter."

When the postman got near the house, Dulcie rushed to the door, and sure enough there was a letter. It was for Mrs. Farmer, not for her, and she did not consider the writing so good as her father's writing generally, but still she never doubted it was from him, and ran with it in triumph to her aunt, who was just "dishing up." "Do open it," she cried eagerly, and to please her Mrs. Farmer put down the potatoes, which were to form the chief portion of the meal, and unfolded the letter. No post-office order fell out of it, so there was a beginning of disappointment for Dulcie, and one much greater was in store for her.

"It's not from *your* father, my dear," said Mrs. Farmer, after a minute or two, in a low agitated voice, "it's all about mine. He's very ill, and my brother writes for me to come to him immediately if I want to see him alive."

Dulcie's first feeling was not one of sympathy ; her own disappointed expectations were uppermost in her mind, and she felt quite a spite against the letter for not being the one she wanted. "I didn't know as your brother *could* write," she said crossly ; "I made sure it was from father, and that he 'd sent me a present."

"Perhaps he's written to Miss Harding," said Mrs. Farmer, tenderly unselfish even in the midst of her grief. "I don't think it would be any harm if you were to run round after dinner and inquire ; but just turn out the potatoes now and put down the bread, while I go and speak to your uncle. He'll know, perhaps, what trains there are."

The potatoes and Dulcie had to wait a little, while John Farmer and his wife stood in the front room discussing the bad news, and hunting for an old railway-guide which the cobbler kept in a drawer, chiefly for the benefit of customers ; but though the child still felt herself personally injured, she had awoke to the consciousness that "aunt" was tried also, and so when they came

in together she did not grumble, but looked up at her with some concern, and said affectionately, "You 'll have some dinner, won't you, aunt, before you go?"

"Yes, there's no train till six in the evening," Mrs. Farmer answered, speaking as quietly as she could, and they all sat down just as usual when John had said grace, but there were tears in the good daughter's eyes, and not even Dulcie's birthday pudding could tempt her to eat more than a very small dinner. "I can't, dear, it seems to choke me," she said gently, when her husband tried to press her to take more, but she was none the less ready to fill Dulcie's plate a second time, and wouldn't talk about her father's illness, or rather her fears that she should not be in time to see him alive, lest she should make the meal too melancholy. Dulcie, who like most children thought all grown-up people old, looked on Mrs. Farmer herself as altogether elderly, and decided in her own mind that Mrs. Farmer's *father* must be quite too old to live, so that her only anxiety was lest her aunt should be kept for the funeral.

"You 'll come back to-morrow, won't you?" she said; "you won't stop on till, till——" She did not like to say "till he's buried," and stopped half-way.

"Till father's better?" said Mrs. Farmer. "I'm very much afraid he won't be better, but still we never know, and he's been such a healthy man, and such a good-living man, so sober and all, he'll have a better chance than most. I shan't stop a day longer than I can help, but father's got no one but an old woman that lives close by to do for him since mother's been dead, and my brother isn't much of a nurse, so I must bide if I'm wanted. I'll tell you how I'm going to manage for you when you come back from Miss Harding's. I think you may go there after dinner if you'll make yourself tidy, and you must ask to speak to her a minute, and say you've taken leave to call and see if she's heard from your father, and afterwards you may tell her about the news I've had, and that I'm called away."

Dulcie felt all the importance of having something to tell as well as something to ask, and both went to Miss Harding's and returned from there in very good spirits. There was no letter from her father, but finding that it was on account of her birthday she had specially expected it, Miss Harding had given her a very pretty picture, in a neat black and gold frame, as a birthday present.

"I shall hang it up right opposite my bed

where I can see it first thing when I wake ; you won't mind, will you ?" Dulcie said eagerly to Mrs. Farmer, whom she found upstairs putting her things together for the journey. "And oh ! Miss Harding told me to say she's very sorry you've had such bad news, and she does hope you'll find Mr. Knight better when you get there. And she says I must be a very good girl while you're away, and not give Mr. Farmer any trouble."

"Yes, my dear," was the answer. "I wanted to talk to you about that. I've just engaged Mrs. Gale to come in every morning and clean up and cook the dinner, but I don't want her to stay for more than half the day because of the expense. You see I've a long way to go by rail, and a long way to come back, and that runs away with the money. I thought, perhaps, if your uncle helped you, you could clear away the dinner before you went to afternoon school, and then wash up the plates and get the tea when you came back. I don't think it'll be much trouble just for the two of you, and you'll like to think you're helping me and taking care of uncle for me, won't you ?"

"O yes !" said the child warmly, giving her an eager hug as she spoke. "And *he* mustn't do anything. I'd sooner do it all myself. I'll


make him very comfortable, aunt, you'll see; but don't you be away long, there's a dear. I can't think whatever I shall do without you."

"Please God I shall be back in two or three days, but I can hardly tell till I get there. I'll write to-morrow and let you know. You'll be a good girl, Dulcie, won't you, and not answer uncle back if he should speak a bit sharp for a minute? God bless you, my dear; and when you're saying your prayers just think of 'Robert Knight,' and ask that he may be spared to me if it's God's will."





CHAPTER V.

“OME, bide still, my dear, bide still ; 'tisn't fit you should be gadding about by yourself. If you want something to do, I can give you a bit of shoe-binding. I miss your aunt's hand at that very much.”

This was spoken kindly enough, but Dulcie was in no humour for work, and so tired of the cobbler's company as to be ready to catch at any excuse for getting away from him. More than a week had passed since Mrs. Farmer's departure, and as no time was yet settled for her return, the child was beginning to get discontented, and to care less and less about the good resolutions she had formed when first left in charge as her uncle's little housekeeper. This was a Saturday, and she had not only been to the market with Mrs. Gale, but since dinner had been out alone for one or two little errands nearer home, so that it was not wonderful John Farmer should think she might now be content

to sit down quietly ; but after taking off her hat and wandering about for a few minutes between the close front room, all smelling of leather, where he sat at work, and the room behind, half kitchen, half parlour, where a wide-open window admitted as much spring air as could ever be had in North Street, Dulcie decided that the house was intolerable, and announced that she was going to "step round" to Mrs. Gale's, to be taught how to crimp a frill for her Sunday frock. And then John objected, and made that offer of giving her some shoe-binding by way of occupation, which was so very little to Dulcie's taste. He was really in want of help and cheering, for he felt his wife's absence very much ; and as old Robert Knight as yet had neither recovered nor died, but was lingering in an apparently hopeless state, it was impossible to say how long Mrs. Farmer might be kept. If he had given Dulcie a hint how dull and lonesome he felt, and how pushed he was for time with regard to an order which he had promised should be finished that night, her affectionate feelings would have been roused, and she would certainly have tried her hand at the shoe-binding, even though it might not have been with much success ; but he was too reserved and silent a man to make any complaint, or

any appeal to her feelings, and justly thought that a command to "bide still" ought to be sufficient to keep her in the house, whether she saw any reason for it or not. Surely in his wife's absence he was the right person to settle what she was to do.

It did not appear so to Dulcie; she ran upstairs when she had rejected his offer of work, and her next appearance was in her hat, and with the latch-key in her hands. "I'm going now," she said, "but I'll be back in time to set the tea."

John pushed his spectacles up to his forehead and looked at her from under his bushy eyebrows with a sort of stern surprise. "What d'ye mean by going out when I told you to bide?" he said. "You know your aunt doesn't like your trapesing about the streets. Take off your hat and sit down; if you don't care to make yourself useful with your needle you can read your books as you did last Saturday."

But Dulcie, who was still too much a creature of moods and impulses, did not feel in the humour for learning voluntary lessons, as she had done in a great fit of industry the week before, so, without a thought of the duty of obedience, she began to insist that she could, should, and would go to Mrs. Gale's, and that she was sure "aunt" would have let her if she had been at home.

John Farmer was what the neighbours called a very quiet man, but he had a will of his own, and he had no idea of being set at nought by a little girl of eleven. He rose and took the latch-key from her, and saying in a tone which few children would have disregarded, "You go straight upstairs and take off your hat. I mean what I say when I tell you not to go out, and if you don't mind me, it'll be the worse for you," he sat down to work again, convinced that he had conquered her.

Dulcie left the room, but in another instant he heard the front door slam, and the brown face glanced up at him defiantly as she dashed past the window. She, perhaps, expected that he would run after her, but that was the last thing he would have cared to do. It would be time enough to show her what he thought of her conduct when she came home again ; meantime he stitched and hammered away at the boot he was making, his brow knit partly with anger and partly with real sorrow and care. He had had to work harder since there had been a third mouth to feed, and it cannot be said that having Dulcie as a daughter had added much to his comfort or happiness, though he was content to keep her, chiefly from tender love of his childless wife, and a little for the girl's own sake, that she

might have what he called "a chance to grow up respectable." "But I doubt," he said to himself this afternoon, "I doubt that she'll do us a credit. If it wasn't that she really loves my Jane, and that Jane's always a-praying for her, I shouldn't have a hopeful thought about her. What with her love of her own way and her bad bringing up, I fear she'll give us both a sorrowful heart before we've done with her, even if she don't go to the bad altogether."

Dulcie felt like going to the bad herself as she rushed recklessly down the street that afternoon; she had let her self-will master her, and all sorts of wild, passionate, foolish desires that had been pretty well laid to sleep for some months, woke up within her now that she had turned her back on her good resolutions. She decided not to go straight to Mrs. Gale's lest John should come after her there, and so, instead of turning to the left when she came to the end of North Street, she turned to the right, and walked towards a bridge from whence she could see the trains pass, and which was a great place for idlers of every description. There was a high piece of paling near the bridge covered with handbills, and a man was in the act of pasting up a new one just as she got there. She stopped to watch him, and when the bill

was up she began to read it, starting with surprise and a sort of doubtful pleasure as she found what it was about. It was headed "The European Circus," and it set forth that in consequence of repeated invitations this most wonderful and talented Circus Company had interrupted their tour "throughout all England" to return to the town, and would give afternoon and evening performances every day for the next fortnight, "Sundays excepted."

"When did they come?" said Dulcie, turning to the bill-sticker, without caring to explain whom she meant by "they."

"The circus! it's about coming now. They're going to get themselves into shape to-morrow, and then on Monday morning they're going right through the town, elephants and all. If you could get to one of the windows in High Street you'd see 'em fine."

"I've seen them, thank you," said Dulcie, with a little toss of her head, "they're friends of mine. Are they going to be in the field close to the railway station again?"

"You can read all that in the bill for yourself," rejoined the man, with a long stare at this odd child, who called the circus people her friends, and yet spoke in such a superior tone, and was so neatly and quietly dressed. Then he went

away whistling, and Dulcie, after reading the handbill through and debating a little with herself, set off in the direction of the circus field, with a sort of dark, sullen determination settling down upon her face. The temptation to go back to the life from which she had been rescued had come to her at a dangerous moment, and she did not ask for grace to resist it, but indulged herself with drawing a bright picture of the pleasures she had enjoyed at the circus, and a very dull and dismal one of the duties she had had to perform in her quiet home in North Street, and the scolding and punishment she might expect if she returned there while John Farmer was angry and her gentle aunt still absent. He had always left the management of her entirely to his wife, and beyond speaking a sharp word now and then when she was naughty, had never attempted anything in the way of discipline ; but the very uncertainty of what sort of punishment he was likely to inflict made Dulcie uncomfortable, and what with that, and what with the dullness and dreariness of the house without its kind mistress, a sort of loathing seized her at the idea of returning to it, and she decided that she was quite justified in running off to her "friend" the manager.

The railway station was quite at the other

end of the town, and she was somewhat tired with her morning's marketing and could not walk very fast, so she was a long time in getting there, and thus had a long time to spend in ungrateful, discontented thoughts. She had become quite sure that she was a very ill-used little girl long before she came in sight of the green and yellow vans whose appearance was so familiar to her.

They were all drawn up in the field, and the horses had been taken out and were grazing here and there at will, but there was no tent erected as yet, and very little sign of life about the encampment except a man with a bucket going up the steps of the elephant's van, and a few dirty children—"Master Charles" and his companions in undress—quarrelling together over some halfpence. Dulcie rightly guessed that the company were having their tea, or the meal that passed for such with them, and finding the gate open she walked boldly in, and avoiding the group of youngsters, went straight on towards the van which she knew to be the manager's. She climbed its steps and was going to knock at the low door, the upper half of which (for it was in two portions) was open, when the fancy seized her to look in first, and so for an instant she stood quietly there, gazing unnoticed on the

party within. The manager and his wife and two of the principal men of the company were having tea together, and there really was a teapot on the table, though there was also a tall black bottle and a jug of beer. They were all eating sausages, and Dulcie thought the smell of these very inviting, though it was mixed with the odours of tobacco and gin; but the dirt and squalor of the little travelling house struck her now in quite a new way, and the coarse oaths which the men used in every sentence of their talk gave her a feeling of horror which she would not have had a year before. They were all three talking eagerly together, while the woman, who was indescribably slatternly and untidy, seemed drowsy, and was nodding over her food, as if the mingled influences of bad air, fatigue, and hot gin-and-water would scarcely let her hold her head up. No one noticed Dulcie, and as she stood there stooping down and peering in, only her hat and eyes could have been visible in any case. Something in this attitude of hers brought over her a sudden remembrance of her bending down to look in at the doll's house windows and "see the ladies at their tea," and the sharp contrast thus presented to her mind had a curious effect upon her. It brought back with startling vividness the memory

of that Michaelmas Day, the longings she had felt then after a beautiful home and a refined mode of life, and, better far, the yearnings after the heavenly glories of which Miss Harding had spoken. Somehow it made it all at once impossible to her to think of opening the little door which was all that separated her from the friends she had come to seek, and gave her such a dread of being seen by them that she let herself drop softly to the ground and rushed to the gate of the field, as if there were no safety for her but in instant flight. The quarrelling children caught sight of her and started to their feet, but she had slammed the gate after her and was far away down the road before they got to it. Tired as she was, she never stopped running until she had left the circus at least a mile behind. Then she leant against the wall of a house for a minute to take breath and to consider what she should do.

It was now long past the time at which John Farmer usually took tea, and Dulcie remembered with a pang her promise that she would be back in time to get it ready, and also the far more earnest promise that she had made the week before about making him comfortable while Mrs. Farmer was away. "I haven't kept my word," she said to herself, "but he does aggravate me so, and now he'll be so angry with me there'll

be no bearing him. I'm sure if he hits me I shall hit him back again, and then I don't know *what* he'll do. O dear! I wish aunt hadn't gone away."

Standing there a long way from home, wishing fruitless wishes, did not after all help matters much; but suddenly a bright thought flashed into Dulcie's mind: she would go to Miss Harding! "I must tell her what I've done," she resolved, "and she'll be vexed with me for having come away; but she always speaks so kind like, and she knows Mr. Farmer ain't like aunt. Yes, I'll go there this very minute; 't isn't much out of the way, even if I do go home afterwards."

She started off cheerily enough, and it was not very long before she reached her friend's house, and rang the bell with a hopeful feeling at her heart. *How* Miss Harding was to help her she could not have explained, but the consciousness that here she would be at any rate *understood* was in itself a comfort to her. It was a great blow to hear when the ring was answered that Miss Harding was "engaged." If she had been a stranger she would probably have been told to call again, but as the servants knew her they allowed her to come in and wait in the kitchen, where cook entertained her with an account of

Lucy's progress at school, and presently, finding she had had no tea, gave her a mug of milk and a thick slice of bread and butter.

"I'm sure Miss Harding would wish you to have something," she said ; "but how is it you haven't had your tea? Is Mr. Farmer out as well as his wife?"

"No," said Dulcie, getting very red, and then she gulped down the milk and set her teeth right in the middle of the slice, as if she were too hungry or too greedy to answer any more questions.

"I'm sure that child's been misbehaving herself," said the cook to the parlourmaid, when by-and-by Miss Harding was free and had sent for her upstairs; and so their mistress thought directly she saw Dulcie's face. She began by asking if Mrs. Farmer had returned, but when the little girl answered in a despairing tone, "No, nor I don't know when she's coming," she went on to say—

"And you are finding it very hard to keep your good resolutions, are you not? Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

Oh! how Dulcie loved her for making it so easy to begin her little story; but when it was ended her first remark was not quite so much to the child's taste.

"And now," she said, gently, "you are

going home, and you are going to take *very* patiently any punishment that Mr. Farmer may think it right to give you. That will be the only way to get right again after having been so wrong."

"I don't see as I ought to be punished," said Dulcie, stubbornly.

"Don't you?" said her friend, quietly. "I do."

This was an unexpected shock, and Dulcie coloured high, and half turned away as if to go, but Miss Harding took hold of her hand and drew her closer instead. "I don't think," she said, "that being sent to bed, or whatever it may be, will be the least hard to bear in itself. Only one thing can make it really hard, and that is your pride, and no one can master that but yourself. You want to be a schoolmistress, and rule others some day, don't you? That is our little secret, and I see you haven't forgotten it, for you have taken great pains to improve in lessons and in many things; but there is one thing that is still more necessary than any book-learning: it is that you should learn to *rule yourself*. We all need to learn it, but those most of all who are to be set over others in any way. If when you felt the wish to go to Mrs. Gale's, and Mr. Farmer

objected, you had made yourself give in, and sat down quietly as he told you, that would have been winning a victory over your wilfulness ; and now *that* opportunity is gone, but you have another given you. You can win a victory over pride to-night, and our dear Lord, who wants you to be His 'faithful soldier and servant,' will be pleased when He sees that victory won."

Dulcie's eyes were full of thought, though there was still a little pout upon her lips. She was trying with all her might to follow her friend's meaning, and when she had grasped it she said—

"But it don't seem like conquering ; it seems like giving in."

"Yes, I understand that, but tell me which is the hardest to you, to hold out or to give in?"

"To give in," said Dulcie, unhesitatingly.

"Then if you do the hardest thing because it is the right thing, because it is our Lord's will for you, that will be behaving more like His soldier, won't it, than if you did what was easiest to yourself? You see *now* how good God has been to you in saving you from the circus, and giving you a home where there are no dreadful oaths, and no drink and dirt. Will it not be very ungrateful if you refuse to be a good girl

in that good home, if you won't take the trouble of conquering your faults?"

Dulcie's colour flushed up again, but not with anger this time.

"I don't mean to be ungrateful," she said, "and I *am* sorry I didn't get Mr. Farmer's tea, after promising aunt faithful to make him comfortable. Will it do if I tell him I'm sorry about that?"

"Not quite. I think you must try to be sorry for having disobeyed him, and humble yourself to own that you were wrong."

Dulcie did not break away from the kind hand which was still holding hers, but a dark look came over her face as if pride were struggling for the mastery. Miss Harding was just going to add that they would say one little prayer for humility together, and that then Dulcie must go home, when the parlourmaid came into the room, saying—

"If you please, ma'am, Mr. Farmer is here, and would be glad if he might speak to you for a minute."

Miss Harding felt the thrill which passed through Dulcie's frame, but, giving a little reassuring pressure to her hand as she dropped it, she said quietly—

"Show Mr. Farmer into the dining-room,

Amelia ; I will speak to him there." And then rising, she whispered softly to the child, " You may wait here till I call you. Ask God to show you how you have been wrong, and to help you to do right now."





CHAPTER VI.



JOHN FARMER had been to Mrs. Gale's to look for Dulcie, and not finding her there had come on to Miss Harding's in search of her, but directly he heard she was in the house such anxiety as he had felt about her prolonged absence was over, and when he asked to speak to Miss Harding it was not to say how anxious he had been, or to complain of Dulcie's disobedience, but to tell her of a letter he had had from his wife by that afternoon's post, and to ask her advice in regard to it.

Robert Knight was dead, and Mrs. Farmer wrote that the funeral was to take place the following Wednesday, and that she should very much like her husband to come to it, if he could anyhow afford it, and could dispose of Dulcie for a day or two. It would not be necessary for him to come till Tuesday, and they would both return together on the Thursday, so she thought just for those two nights the girl might sleep at

Mrs. Gale's, or might get one of her elder school-fellows to keep her company in the house. She suggested a certain Ellen Meadows, a girl of thirteen, who was very much to be trusted, but as John had seen as he came along one of the handbills announcing the arrival of the circus, he decided in his own mind that it would be most unsafe to leave Dulcie with no older protector.

"For who knows," as he remarked to Miss Harding, "if that manager chap mightn't see her in the street, and try to get her back again, and what could a young gal like Ellen do to withstand him? I don't think as Dulcie really wants to go back, and there's something in that, for she's not one to let herself be talked into anything she hasn't a mind to, but still if she was in a contrary mood there's no saying what she mightn't do. I shouldn't be easy to leave her unless it was with some one who would look well after her."

"I don't think anything could tempt Dulcie back to the circus *now*," said Miss Harding, fresh from hearing the child's history of her foolish flight there, and her haste to get away from it again, "but I think you are quite right to be careful with whom you leave her. Have you made any arrangement with Mrs. Gale?"

No, John had found that Dulcie if left there

would have to sleep crowded up in a bed with three or four other children, and he didn't think his "missus," who was always so particular over her, would like that, so having but few acquaintances, and not well knowing to whom else to apply, he had come to ask if Miss Harding could tell him of any respectable people with whom he might leave the child.

"I should *like* for to see the old man put under ground," he added, "for he's been a good father to Ellen, and 'tis but proper I should show him all the respect I can," but not a word did he utter of his difficulties with regard to *expense*, for poor as he was he would have scorned to beg, and was too delicate-minded even to show his wife's letter lest the words, "if you can anyhow afford it, dear John," should bring him the offer of this kind of assistance.

"I think you had better leave Dulcie with me," said Miss Harding, after a moment's thought, "I can promise that my maids will be kind to her, and I will take care that she comes straight back from school, and does not linger about in the streets. She may come as early as you like on Tuesday."

This was more than John had hoped or thought of, and a great relief to his mind, so he made no difficulty—though scarcely perhaps

showing all the gratitude he *felt*—and it was settled that he should bring Dulcie himself to Miss Harding's on Tuesday morning before starting on his journey.

"Then I shall know for certain that she's safe—and happy too," he said quite cheerfully, "and that last's more than she's been at home since the missus has been gone. I was terrible put about with her this afternoon, but since she came to you, ma'am, I don't so much mind, and I'll take her home with me now, if you please, for I've got a job of work to finish, and I can't afford to lose any more time."

'She did not come *straight* to me," said Miss Harding; "but I will leave her to tell you her story herself. I think she will tell it very openly if she finds you are not angry with her, and I believe this afternoon has been a kind of turning-point in her life, after which we may expect she will go on more comfortably."

Then Dulcie was called, and though she came into the room without any hesitation or sign of fear, there was no defiance in her eyes now, and genuine shame and contrition were in her voice as she said, "I am sorry, *uncle*"—the word was brought out not without difficulty—"that I was disobedient, and let you get your own tea. I'll try not to behave so bad again."

It did seem at the moment much more like giving in than conquering ; but, nevertheless, it was the outward sign of a victory which had been won during those few minutes that Dulcie was alone, a real victory over self, won upon her knees.

John Farmer and she went home together through the lamplit streets, and the only punishment he fixed for her was this, that she was never to go outside the door again, even for a minute, till her aunt came back (except to school) without first asking his leave. This was a little restraint, and by nature Dulcie disliked all restraints ; but it was so much less than she feared that she would scarcely have felt punished at all but for a sudden shock which came upon her after her return home. John Farmer at once lighted his lamp and sat down to work, and she, after taking off her hat and jacket, began to look about for the tea-things to wash them up ; but there was not a sign of anything having been used, and the little milk-jug was just as full as it had been when she left the house. Very anxiously she opened the door of the front room, and inquired, " Haven't you had any tea at all, uncle ? " and the answer, " No, my girl, 'twould have taken more time than I could spare to make the kettle boil even," came upon her

like a blow, though it was not angrily spoken. It was not merely that he had had to get his own tea ready, but that he had had to go without. Dulcie felt herself a terrible culprit at that moment ; there were actually tears in the dark eyes as she said, " I'm so sorry ; let me make you some now. I'll light up the fire and make the kettle boil in no time."

But John rejected the offer of tea, and his only concession to Dulcie's pleading was to have " the drop o' beer that he had left at dinner " and a little bit of bread and cheese placed beside him, that he might take a snatch of it as he worked, instead of waiting for it till his usual supper-time. And to Dulcie's timid offer of helping him with the shoe-binding, he replied, a little sternly, " No, you'd make no hand of it, beginning it by candlelight, and when I'm too busy to put you in the right road. There's only one pair o' shoes to be bound ; I must do them soon as ever I've finished these boots, and then I must go home with the lot. The best thing you can do is to take your supper and be off to bed."

So there was no possibility of " making amends." It was in a really humbled frame of mind that Dulcie laid herself down to sleep that night.

She was as good as she knew how to be on

Sunday and Monday, and when John left her at Miss Harding's on Tuesday afternoon, with the promise that he would tell his wife she had behaved very well, "except just o' Saturday," her spirits rose, and she could not imagine how it was she had ever felt impatient under that trial of her aunt's absence, which was now so soon to end.

The two days of her visit were very pleasant, except that cook fretted her a little by expecting her to be as quiet as Lucy ; and when on Thursday evening Mrs. Farmer herself came to fetch her home, the sight of that kind face, even though it was a little paled by watching and sorrow, brought with it such full contentment that it seemed as if all trials were over. It was likely that after the expense of the journey, and Mrs. Farmer's mourning, simple as it was, money would be scarce in the little household, and Dulcie expected "to live plainer than ever," as she expressed it to herself ; but she did not care about that, or anything else, now that she had got "aunt" home, and though now and then a savoury whiff from the sausage feast in the yellow van would seem to come across her, she no longer wished herself back there, even for a minute. She told Mrs. Farmer all about her flight, and added, with a blush, that Miss

Harding said it was not quite honourable to have stood on the steps looking and listening ; but when her aunt rejoined, "I'm grieved to think you should ever have gone after those people, my dear," she answered, thoughtfully, "Only if I hadn't I should never have known how different Mrs. Smith is from *you* ; I didn't notice things when I was there before like as I do now."

She could not be altogether sorry that she had had that one glimpse of the life from which she had been rescued, and about this time a certain resentment grew up in her mind against her father for having placed her in it, and also for not writing to her or sending any more money for her clothes. She never spoke of this ; but when Mrs. Farmer said something about buying her a new hat, she declared she did not want it ; and not till she was assured that it could be *well* afforded would she allow herself any dreams of what it should be like.

Robert Knight had left quite a nice little sum of money to be divided between his son and daughter, besides a cottage-full of homely but substantial furniture, and when their share came to them the Farmers decided, after a good deal of thought, that they might without imprudence move into rather a better street, and also make

one or two additions to Dulcie's wardrobe, whether George Ward sent any more money or not.

The move took place after a while, and though the new house was not much larger than the old one, it was a great deal more airy, and had a little strip of garden at the back, which, as Mrs. Farmer said, was more than one could have expected to find in a town. Their lodger, a very respectable man, went with them, and though two or three of John's old customers deserted him, they were people whose custom had not been worth much, and now that he had a small shop-front, and was able to make a better appearance, it was likely that he would soon get others of a higher grade.

Altogether things were prospering with the worthy couple, and Dulcie came in for her full share of their new comforts, and was as tenderly and thoughtfully cared for as any child in the place.

She did not prove ungrateful; it was wonderful what efforts she made to master her temper whenever she felt it rising, and she would beg Mrs. Farmer's pardon now for a rude or hasty word with an earnest regret which she would not have shown about a far worse fault in earlier days.

John by degrees quite changed his mind about her, and instead of predicting that she "would come to no good," took to saying, privately, that if she went on as she'd begun, he believed she'd be a credit to his missus yet. He and his wife were both aware now of her wish to be a school-mistress, and warmly encouraged her in it; and though the illness and death of Miss Pearce, the good mistress whom she had taken for her model in many things, just as she grew to be thirteen, was a great trial, her resolution was not in any way changed. On the contrary, helped by private lessons from Miss Harding, she worked away unremittingly towards the desired end.

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CHAPTER VII.



IT was a busy day in the Parish Schools. The Inspector's visit was to take place in a day or two, and mistress and teachers were doing their best to get all the knowledge they could into the heads of the numerous scholars in the girls' room. The youngest pupil-teacher, who was engaged with two of the smaller classes, seemed to enjoy her work more than anybody else, and was throwing her whole heart into it. She was tall and slight, her neat well-fitting dress (the long-coveted "plum-coloured merino") was finished off by a nice little collar, and her wavy dark hair was gathered into a coil of plaits at the back with almost a grown-up effect. She was so bright and intelligent, and, spite of being just a little dictatorial, seemed to get on so nicely with the children, that it was no wonder the mistress glanced at her approvingly now and then, and almost went the length of holding her up as a pattern to her less capable companions.

Altogether it was an hour of success with her, and though there was no foolish conceit visible in her face or manner, she seemed to have a comfortable amount of self-confidence, and a consciousness that she was held in respect by those around her.

All at once there came a loud and continuous knocking at the door, and the mistress sent one of the children to open it. There was a high wind that day, such as sometimes makes even July very un-summer-like, and directly the little girl turned the handle the blast blew the door fully open, and disclosed to all that were near it a low, ruffianly-looking man, too well-clad to be a beggar, and yet wholly unlike the decent labouring men who occasionally, though very rarely, appeared at the school with a message about their "Polly" or "Jenny." There was a cab in waiting behind him, and the driver with a pipe in his mouth was standing at his elbow, and peered into the room in a way that made the children titter, and brought the mistress herself to the door, prepared to say to the men that they had come to the wrong place, and to dismiss them as quickly as possible.

But just as she reached the spot the ill-looking man was saying, "I've come for a gal called Dulcie," and the cabman, pointing to the handsome pupil-teacher who held her head so

high, said gruffly, "I think as that's her, though I ain't sure. I know I've seed her along o' him."

"Miss Ward!" was all the mistress could say. She had only been at the head of the school for a little more than a year—since Miss Pearce's death—and had come from quite another place, so she had not known Dulcie in her ragged days, and could not in the least believe that there could be any sort of connection between the nice superior girl and the low men before her.

"Ward ain't the name," said the first spokesman, "but in course they've lots of *alibis*, they're obliged to it. Just ask the young 'oman to step here, mum, and see if it ain't her father as I've got with me. There's no use askin' *him* nothin', for he's too ill to answer, but she'll know her father, be sure."

"There must be some mistake," said the mistress, with as much dignity as was possible in her hurry to get rid of the men and go on with the business of the day.

"Well, just you ask her, mum," put in the cabman, indicating Dulcie with a nod of his head; "the party calls hisself Robins, but I'm pretty sartin' I've seed her along o' him."

The mistress went up to where Dulcie was standing, by the blackboard, from which she had been giving her demonstration lesson. "Do

you know anything of these men, my dear?" she said in a low voice.

"I have seen the cabman before," said Dulcie, and indeed she remembered well that he used to lodge in North Street, not far from the Farmers, though she could not recollect having ever exchanged words with him.

"They've got some sick man in the cab that they say is your father; it must be a mistake; but you'd better just come and see. You've got a father living, haven't you?"

"Yes," replied Dulcie, shortly, and she followed the mistress to the door. Her head was still held up, and her step very proud and firm, but her cheeks had flushed crimson, and her heart was beating wildly with anger and dismay.

"Jest you look in here," said the low man, beckoning to her as she approached, and the driver held open the door of the cab and pointed to its occupant. At first she could only see a strange limp figure huddled up on the floor of the cab, but in another instant it slowly lifted a ghastly face scarred with bruises, and a spark of intelligence shone in the dull eyes as they were lifted to hers. Was it her father? She could hardly tell. A sickening fear that it was seized her, but he was too altered for certain recog-

niton, and she rejected the possibility with horror ; it *could* not, it *should* not be he !

"It's somebody very ill, Miss Adams," she said, drawing back, and addressing herself solely to the mistress ; "I don't know who it is, but he looks *dreadfully* ill ; don't you think they'd better take him to the hospital ?"

"Certainly, if it's no one who has friends in the town," rejoined the mistress, stepping forward to look, and recoiling almost with the same horror as Dulcie. "Poor wretched man ! you'd better drive him there at once," she added, "I've no girl here belonging to him, I'm sure."

"Not if it ain't *her*," said the cabman, still looking hard at Dulcie.

"No, Miss Ward doesn't know him," said Miss Adams, anxious to protect her teacher from further annoyance. "I was sure it must be a mistake. You'd better not waste any more time, but go straight to the hospital ; they'll always take in an accident case."

"Queer sort of accident this," said the driver under his breath, with a rough laugh ; "howsum-dever, we can but try ; what do you say, Bill ?"

"Well, there's no use stopping here if the young 'oman says she doesn't know him ; and if her name ain't Robins, I've no proof, of course," replied Bill, after a moment's thought.

"Well, then, here goes," said the cabman, shutting the door of the cab and jumping up on the box. He did it as quickly as possible, and his friend had got up beside him and they had driven off almost before one could count ten ; but still Dulcie had an impression of a faint struggle and cry from the sick man inside, a feeble attempt to stop them, a sudden stretching out of his arms to some one—was it to *her* ?

"It must have been your having the same Christian name as the girl they're looking for that led to the mistake, I suppose," said Miss Adams, as she closed the door. "It's such an uncommon one, no doubt the cabman thought there couldn't be two of the same."

"Aunt knew a child of the name in the country once," said Dulcie, and then she went back to her class and took up the lesson where she had left it off, stopping some whispering that was going on among the children with quiet but decisive authority. Her cheeks were still glowing, but there was little other outward sign of the feelings that were struggling within her. The school business *had* to be attended to, and so she went on with it, though there was quite a storm of passionate emotion in her heart. It seemed to her as if her old life had come back and claimed her just as her more recent life of

prosperity and well-doing and general approval had become established—just as she had proved her fitness for the useful and honourable career which she had marked out for herself. She tried to make up her mind that the man in the cab was *not* her father, but yet it might so easily have been ! He was a prize-fighter, as she well knew, and she had a dim recollection of having seen him once, after a fight in which he had got worsted, in almost as battered and sinking a condition as the poor miserable creature from whom she had just turned away in horror. She had been struggling bravely with her temper and her sauciness, and all her wild, careless ways for many a long day, but she had let a vast amount of *pride* grow up in her heart unsuspected, and her feeling towards her father had become a hard and bitter one, which, as it was left unspoken, had escaped rebuke or condemnation from others. She seemed a very good girl now in the eyes of every one about her, and hers was the attractive goodness of an eager, warm, impulsive nature under control, not the mere tame “pretty behaviour” of those who have not courage to be naughty. Nor was it mere outward show, for deep down in her heart was a real true love of God, and a desire to please Him ; but still she had been to a certain

extent indulging wrong feelings, secretly and almost unconsciously, and they had made it difficult to do the right thing, or even see what the right thing *was*—now in this crisis of her young life. She had prepared a sore battle for herself, sorer than any she had fought yet, and the issue of it was doubtful just now, for she was not praying to be helped through it.

The lessons came to an end at last, and though after the children were gone Dulcie and the other teachers were detained to receive some directions for the morrow, it was not much more than a quarter past four when she left the school. One of her companions would fain have kept her to talk about the queer interruption they had had, but Dulcie would not linger, and had wisely made up her mind to go and tell Miss Harding what had happened, and ask for her opinion before going home. She felt as if she could more easily speak to Miss Harding on the subject than to her aunt, and yet it was very difficult to open her mouth about it to anybody. So incoherent was her story that the kind and attentive listener could not at once understand the drift of it.

“A sick man in a cab, you say, and you asked them to take him to the hospital ; that was very good advice, I think,” she said ; “why are you so unhappy about it ?”

"Oh, because it wasn't illness altogether ; he had been fighting, I'm sure," said Dulcie, bringing out her words unwillingly, "and I don't *think* the cabman believed they would take him in at the hospital, and if he was beaten he mayn't have any money, and then the police——"

She broke off suddenly, and stood twisting round and round one of the buttons of her neat black jacket, her head bent down, so that Miss Harding could hardly see her face.

For one instant her friend still felt puzzled, and began wonderingly, "Was it any one you knew then?" but in another moment she had guessed the truth. "Oh! Dulcie, was it your *father*, perhaps, do you mean? But you didn't let him go away without being sure? You can't mean that!"

"Yes," said Dulcie, and then she stood with a lowering brow and a quivering lip, and a feeling in her heart, "Yes, and I would do it again, too. If it *was* he, he had no right to come and disgrace me before them all!"

Miss Harding was silent for a minute, pondering the matter in her mind. Then she said, "I don't suppose they *would* take him in at the hospital, and when he has once driven away from there we may find it difficult to trace him, but there is often a little delay while they are

inquiring into a case, so I think if we started directly we might catch him. Go and call one of the cabs at the corner of the square while I put on my bonnet."

"But I don't see why it should have been father," said Dulcie quickly, as her friend turned to leave the room. "They said his name was Robins."

Miss Harding paused with her hands on the door. "Do you feel quite sure that it was *not* he, now that you have thought it over? Look at me, dear, and tell me, for if we are to go we must go at once."

Dulcie raised her usually frank eyes boldly enough, but they fell before her friend's penetrating gaze, and a deep blush rose to her cheeks as she answered, "No, I can't be sure, I wish I could. Oh, it's miserable, *miserable!*"

There was real anguish in her tone, but Miss Harding did not stop to comfort her, as she would have done at another time. "We can talk as we go along," she said, and hastened upstairs; whereupon Dulcie ran to fetch the cab.

Miss Harding was acting quickly and, as it seemed, impulsively, because there was no time to be lost, but she did not for one instant mean to claim the sick man as Dulcie's father without full inquiry. She had often feared that George Ward would turn up in some such disreputable

plight, and if Dulcie had been ready and anxious to acknowledge him she would have questioned and hesitated far more, feeling that in that case the girl might have been led away by a fancied resemblance; but Dulcie's shuddering repugnance to believe that it was he, combined with her evidently instinctive conviction that it was, made it seem more than probable that this was indeed George Ward, and that "Robins" was merely the alias which she had reason to think he occasionally assumed. And if only for the sake of saving Dulcie much future self-reproach it seemed desirable that the matter should be cleared up without delay.

When they were in the cab and driving towards the hospital, Miss Harding said, "I want to ask you several questions, but before I begin let us both be quiet for a minute, and ask God in our hearts to give us wisdom, and help us to do just what is right. Ask this for me as well as for yourself."

Dulcie only said, "Yes, ma'am," and was silent, praying, as Miss Harding hoped, but with her face turned towards the window, and something a little stubborn in her general bearing.

After this short pause Miss Harding inquired minutely into the particulars of what the sick man had looked like, what his companion had

said, and what the cabman had said, and so forth ; and when in answer to the question, " What made the cabman think he knew you ? " Dulcie replied, " He used to lodge near us in North Street once, though I think he moved away before we did," she thought to herself that they might possibly be able to trace him and to get information in that way, even if they failed to find him or those he had driven that afternoon. Dulcie did not know the man's name, and had not noticed the number of the cab ; it was very shabby, and it had a grey horse, that was all she could tell.

They were driving fast, and it was very difficult to talk in such a rattle, so after she had asked the necessary questions Miss Harding became silent again, and at first Dulcie seemed inclined to be silent too. She was still looking out of window, but presently she turned round for a minute and said in a low, agitated voice, " We couldn't take him home. There is no room he could have but mine, and uncle wouldn't like it. He can't bear to have any one about the place that doesn't look quite—quite respectable." The last words came out with a jerk, as if she hated to say them, but could find no other to express her meaning.

" I have been thinking about that," Miss

Harding said. "It might, perhaps, be too much to ask, kind as your uncle and aunt are; they might think it an injury to the business. Perhaps in the first instance we had better take him to old Mrs. Nichol's, in North Street; she is wanting a lodger, I know, and her spare room is all ready."

"But if he is *very* ill she would hardly be able to do for him; it takes her I don't know how long to get up and down stairs."

"But *you* would be able to help in nursing him," said Miss Harding, cheerfully; "it may perhaps prove fortunate that the holidays are so close at hand, as that will give you leisure."

Dulcie did not make any answer, but instead of turning her face to the window again she drew back into the corner of the seat and hid it against the side of the cab. The dejection of the attitude was only a little sign of what was passing in her mind. Her young imagination had conjured up a most miserable picture of what her life was going to be. She saw herself back once more in the dull, dirty little street, her father lying in bed, smoking and grumbling, as in the old days when they used to lodge at the Farmers, and some low friend of his dropping in now and then to take a glass of gin-and-water with him, or cheer him up with news of the

latest prize-fights. "It would have been better if I hadn't got different," she said aloud, "I shouldn't have minded then, and father would have been quite content with me."

Miss Harding understood her so well that she was able to guess at the thoughts which had prompted this speech.

"Perhaps it is partly for his sake that you have been *allowed* to get different," she said, gently. "Your father is fond of you, Dulcie, in his own way, and all that you have learnt since the time he left you may have made you able to be a much greater help to him than you could have been otherwise. Don't let yourself fret, my child, perhaps we may find this man is only a stranger, but if it *be* your father you may be sure God is bringing you together again for some good purpose, and that He will help you, and show you what to do."

Dulcie had lifted her head while Miss Harding was speaking; it would have seemed want of respect not to do so; but as soon as the words were ended she hid her face again. They had brought a faint gleam of light into the miserable prospect, but it still appeared gloomy enough. "If it's God's will that father should come back to me like this, and that Miss Adams and everybody should scorn me, I suppose it must be all

right," she said to herself; "but oh! I wish it were *not* His will!"

Then she asked herself whether she could submit, whether she should be able to bear it, and happily, after a sharp struggle with herself, she decided that she could and must. There were a great many wrong feelings still left to conquer, but she had crushed down that first utter refusal to accept what was so humbling to her pride; there was no longer the wild rebellion in her heart that there had been in that first bitter moment when she was taken unawares.

There was silence again, and then Miss Harding said, "We are not far from the hospital now," and turned to look out of the window at her side. Suddenly she exclaimed, "A very shabby cab with a grey horse, you said. Can it be this one, do you think?" She drew back to let the girl look, and there sure enough, at the door of a small old-fashioned inn at this country end of the town, was a cab, which appeared to Dulcie the very same as she had seen at the school. It was probably empty, for no one was with it, and the horse had a nose-bag on and was taking a feed.

Miss Harding called to their own driver to stop, and immediately got out, bidding Dulcie remain where she was. She went and looked in

at the window of the other cab, and found to her surprise that it was not empty. At the first glimpse she thought it was, but there was a figure lying prone on the floor in such a strange attitude that she could not see the face. It was evidently Dulcie's "sick man," but whether he was asleep or in a faint she could not tell, though from the bloodless look of the one hand that was visible she fancied the latter. She sent her own cabman into the house to call out the other driver, and though he came looking rather excited and answered her first questions somewhat rudely, he calmed down when he saw he had "a real lady" to deal with, and, perhaps partly prompted by a nod and wink from Miss Harding's driver, became profoundly civil.

"No, they wouldn't take 'im in at the 'orspital," he said. "They said they was full, and the chap as was with me had words with the porter, and they warned me as I'd best drive 'em both to the perlice station ; but there ! he'd be dead afore night if they put him in the cells. The man in here, I mean, mum," and he jerked his thumb towards the cab.

"Are you sure he is not dead now ?" said Miss Harding, quickly.

"No, he's asleep, or in a faint, or something ; I was just askin' for summat 'ot for him when

you sent for me; but I can't afford to lose all my day a-driving him about the town. They'd take him in at the union, I should think, if we could get an order. Perhaps you can tell me, mum, where to go for it?"

"I should like to speak to him first, if he can be revived sufficiently to answer me," she said.

But when the cabman lifted him up in his arms and turned the face towards her, she saw that the case was desperate, and at the same time a strong conviction seized her that it *was* George Ward himself. There was not, however, much really recognisable but the crisp curly black hair, and she bethought her at once of other means of identifying him.

"Has he anything in his pockets," she said, "an address, or anything?"

The cabman dived into them without ceremony, and drew forth one or two pipes, a few halfpence, and a tobacco pouch. The latter was half open, and there was in it only a piece of crumpled paper. It had writing on it—large childish letters; and as the man twisted it round and round, looking vainly for an address, Miss Harding thought she recognised the words, "Your loving daughter, Dulcie."

She asked him to give it her, and it was, indeed, an old letter of Dulcie's, with no date

or address, but containing references to "aunt" and "Mr. Farmer," such as clearly proved it to be hers. It was, perhaps, the last letter he had received from her, for those she had written him since her handwriting had improved had come back to her through the post with "not known" written on them, and for some time she had ceased to write at all.

This was certainly *one* proof of identity, and when Miss Harding had seen and spoken with the sick man's companion, and had heard that when "took bad"—under what circumstances was not explained—he had begged to be taken into the town, and "straight to his girl, Dulcie, in North Street," she could no longer reasonably doubt that it was indeed George Ward.

She asked to speak to the landlady of the inn, and borrowed from her one or two pillows, and as soon as she had arranged these, quickly but skilfully, so as to give some ease to the poor wretched man, she desired the driver to take him at once to Mrs. Nichol's, and added that she would follow immediately, calling for a doctor on her way. She was just turning round to go back to her own cab, when she stumbled against some one close behind her, and found it was Dulcie.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am," said the girl,

breathlessly; "but may I go in the cab with father? I can manage so as not to be in his way."

There was no time for discussion, so Miss Harding let her get in, and then saw with dismay George's ruffianly friend approach as if to get on the box. She stopped this, however, the cabmen to her great relief both coming to her help in the matter, and dismissed him as civilly as she could, promising to take every care of the sick man, and thanking him, in Dulcie's name, for what he had done. Then she drove off rapidly to the doctor's, and "Bill" stood watching the two retreating cabs with a somewhat discomfited expression.

"But it *was* his gal, then, after all," he said to himself, by way of consolation. "Jenkins and me was right about that; and if she'd only 'ad the 'eart to own it at fust, we need never have gone near that ere blessed 'orspital. Won't he make the lady pay, just, for all the time as has been took up! Whoever would a thought that Robins had such people belonging to him?"



CHAPTER VIII.

“**I**F she had but had the heart to own him at once!” This was not Bill’s thought only. Dulcie was saying it over and over to herself as she drove along, and still more completely did compunction take possession of her as she sat by her father’s bedside in Mrs. Nichol’s top front room after the doctor was gone.

There had been no difficulty in getting George Ward taken in, and Miss Harding had been fortunate enough to find her own doctor at home, and able to accompany her without delay ; but so much time had been lost in the short railway journey from the heath where the fight had taken place, and in driving the wretched man about the town, first in search of his daughter, and then in the fruitless errand to the hospital, that his hurts—which ought to have been attended to at once—seemed likely to cause his speedy death. The insensibility in which Miss Harding had found him continued, and it

was not clear, Dr. Burton said, that he would ever recover consciousness.

Poor little Dulcie was wretched indeed. She sat for some minutes quietly, almost stupefied by the depth of her grief, then she slid on to her knees, though at first she did not pray. Was it her fault that her father was to die thus insensible? He had been conscious when she had first seen him that afternoon, although he could not speak. If he had been taken straight to some shelter then, and something had been done for him at once, would he not have revived, for a while at any rate? Might there not then have been a *possibility* of his dying penitent and comforted? She did not seek any excuse for herself; she did not say to herself that from the way things had happened *some* hesitation on her part had been natural and pardonable, she felt *guilty*, guilty towards her father, guilty before God, and it was this which kept her dumb even when she was upon her knees.

But then there came into her mind the verse of a hymn which had been sung in church the previous Sunday. She had liked the tune so much that it had been running in her head ever since, and this had helped her to remember the words:—

" Intercessor, Friend of sinners,
Earth's Redeemer, plead for me,
Where the songs of all the sinless
Sweep across the crystal sea."

Was that great Intercession going on at this moment, and would it not avail to win mercy for the dying man who could not speak to plead for himself ?

Hope leapt up in her heart, and when she began to hope she began to pray—a disconnected agitated prayer, but very earnest, and likely to be heard because it was what Dulcie's prayers were not always, very *humble*, full of a deep consciousness of her own unworthiness, and of contrite clinging to the Intercessor for whose sake alone she could expect a gracious answer.

It was not long before Mrs. Farmer arrived, summoned by Miss Harding, and she watched with Dulcie all through that night, or rather she insisted on doing the whole of the watching, and made "the child"—as the girl of fourteen still seemed to her—lie down for some hours on a little stretcher bed which Mrs. Nichol brought into the room. Dulcie had thought she could not sleep, but she did for a while, and when she woke in the early morning it was a great comfort to be told that her father was not dead, that on the contrary he had just

moved slightly, and had been able for the first time to swallow a little of the brandy with which Mrs. Farmer had been constantly moistening his lips.

"Then perhaps he would understand if the vicar came and prayed by him, though he couldn't last night," said Dulcie directly, and she thought it rather heathenish of her aunt to say that the *doctor* must first be fetched, as he had desired to be summoned if there were the slightest sign of consciousness. She ran, however, obediently to Dr. Burton's house, and a terrible weight was lifted from her heart when he by-and-by gave it as his opinion that there was a little more hope, and that her father would in all probability linger some days in a more or less conscious state, even if his life could not be saved altogether. There was need for constant care and watching, and a change for the worse might come again at any time, so it did not seem right for Dulcie to leave him, though her duties at the school were urgent. It was still early, and Mrs. Farmer and she were debating which of them should go to the mistress to beg for leave of absence, when Miss Harding came in, and undertook the errand, promising also to give Miss Adams her personal help if necessary, which was likely to smooth matters very much.

Dulcie went down to let her out, and paused for a minute before opening the door ; there was something which she was struggling to say.

"You will tell Miss Adams about father, I suppose, ma'am," she said with difficulty, "and you will say, please, it *was* he in the cab. She will think me very wicked, but still she ought to know. I didn't want aunt to go to her, because she would have excused me so, and I haven't been able to tell her all either, for we can't talk in father's room."

"No, you are quite right to keep him quiet ; I will tell Miss Adams all that is necessary," said Miss Harding, kindly ; and then she added, "Dulcie, my child, you will try to be very wise and patient, won't you ? waiting on God to show you what to do. I think you have thanked Him already, haven't you, for bringing your father back to you, and not letting him die by the way ?"

"Yes," said Dulcie, softly, with starting tears. She looked worn and anxious and a little untidy, very different from the bright, trim, self-assured maiden that she had appeared the previous day ; but in reality there was a change in her for *the better*, her hard resentful feelings had gone away, and she was no longer anxious to save herself from being "scorned," but on the contrary despised herself for that care for her own

reputation which had made her act so cruelly. She would cling to her father now under all circumstances, and perhaps there would even be a danger of her becoming a little defiant in her championship of him. She would not let Mrs. Farmer pet or pity her, and when old Mrs. Nichol, who had known her from her first coming to the town, remarked at dinner-time, "Well, it *was* a trial for you, your father turning up like that, and you so comfortable with them that had adopted you, and so much thought of by the gentry!" she answered rather shortly, "I am very glad he *has* turned up," and then finished her meal as quickly as possible, and ran to her post again. Except just to eat this dinner, which Mrs. Farmer brought for her in a basket, she scarcely left her father's room all that day. Her aunt had to go home for the greater part of the morning, and again at tea-time, and Mrs. Nichol kept chiefly in the lower regions, knowing she could be summoned if wanted, so Dulcie was constantly alone with the patient, though the vicar came in once and said some prayers and spoke a few kind words to her.

Whether George Ward had been able to follow the prayers at all could not be told; Dulcie managed occasionally to get him to swallow some beef-tea or milk, and now and then, when

she said something to him in a soothing, affectionate way, there was a slight quiver of the eyelids as if he heard and understood ; but these were the only tokens of consciousness. It was a strange, solemn, anxious time, like nothing that had come before it, and Dulcie felt as if she were getting quite old and careworn when it was prolonged throughout another, and yet another day. But on the fourth morning there was a decided change for the better, and by the end of a week, though still very feeble, George was perfectly awake to all that was going on around him, and would answer in a kind of hoarse whisper when he was spoken to, without however seeming equal to the effort of voluntarily beginning conversation. Once only did he say more than was absolutely necessary, and that was when Mrs. Farmer asked him if he were not pleased to find Dulcie so grown and improved. "Yes," he said, "oh, yes! she was a fine handsome girl and very attentive to him. What could ever have made him fancy that she didn't want to own him? He could not recollect what had put it in his head."

Mrs. Farmer did not tell him, and earnestly hoped he would not recollect. She had heard all about it from Dulcie by this time, and saw a great many more excuses for her child than the

"child" was willing to make for herself. It *was*, as old Mrs. Nichol had said, a trial for the girl that her father should turn up in such a wretched condition, and the Farmers felt it very keenly for her, because they had themselves been always so respected and respectable, and had rejoiced in their continually growing prosperity for their adopted daughter's sake much more than for their own. John had quite a nice shop now, with workmen under him and plenty of superior customers, and though he and his wife were entirely above the folly of priding themselves on this, or looking down on their humbler friends, it did seem to place a wider gulf than ever between him and a low, thriftless man like George Ward, who had not even the heritage of a good name to leave to his only girl.

It is doubtful whether the shoemaker was really glad when he heard that George was likely to live, and he only grunted when Mrs. Farmer said, "but we may hope, after the lesson he's had, he'll be quite a changed man." "How's he to live if he *is* a changed man?" he said after a bit; "at his age 'tisn't likely he can learn any respectable trade." She suggested that he had been used to speak of giving boxing lessons to young gentlemen, and that possibly he might get employed at a boarding-school in the

town where the pupils were much given to athletic sports ; but her husband pooh-poohed this idea, and by-and-by it became very plain that though George was not going to die, his powers of activity were gone from him, and his life must be that of an invalid. The injuries which he had sustained had brought on partial paralysis, and even when he was said to be "quite got round," he could only walk with a stick, and could not rise from his chair without assistance.

It now became a question how he was to be supported, and Mrs. Nichol and others strongly urged that he should be "passed to his own parish," and find a refuge in the workhouse there for the rest of his days, Dulcie, in the meanwhile, remaining with the Farmers.

There was a good deal to be said for this plan, but the man himself shrank from it with horror. Although he had really by vice sunk himself quite below the level of a decent pauper, he did not realise this, and looked upon the idea of "the House" as a degradation ; moreover, the notion of the monotonous life, and the strict rules, appalled him. He made pathetic appeals to Dulcie in his finest language to save him from this fate, and promised her that if she would devise some means for their remaining together he would never touch a drop of drink or a card,

nor let her hear a single bad word, and that if it would make her happy he would even go to church as soon as he felt himself able to hobble thus far.

Miss Harding and Mrs. Farmer were sorely puzzled what to advise, John, of course, being in favour of the workhouse; but Dulcie had at once made up her mind that her father ought not to be forced into the union against his will, and therefore had only to consider how he was to be supported out of it. She fancied that her own earnings as a pupil-teacher would maintain *her*, and as what she had already earned as a candidate had been put by in the savings bank—the Farmers having declined to take anything for her board and clothing—there was a small sum in hand to meet the expenses of her father's illness; but how was he to be fed and lodged and clothed for the future? She knew a blind man who kept himself by making baskets, and the bright idea struck her that if her father could learn to do this he might maintain himself in the same way, as he had still the use of his hands, but the difficulty was how to get him taught. After a good many other plans had been thought of and set aside as impossible, Miss Harding came to her help in this, and kindly offered to procure for him lessons in basket-weaving, besides undertaking to pay the doctor's bill, which would

have swallowed so large a part of Dulcie's savings. A sort of compact was made that for one year George should remain as Mrs. Nichol's lodger—she was willing to keep him “if he behaved hisself,” she said—that Dulcie should live there too, and help him with his basket-weaving out of school-hours in any time she could spare from her own studies; but that if between them they could not earn enough to maintain him, at the end of that time a new arrangement should be made. As the “arrangement” probably meant the workhouse, George rather shuddered at the idea of it, but he had that kind of belief in something turning up which is so common among thriftless people, and considered that this fortunate something might very likely arise before the year was out, and enable him to escape the union without working himself over-hard. He was very quick in learning his new trade, but not very handy or industrious in practising it; save for the help of Dulcie's supple young fingers, his baskets would have been too clumsily finished off to find a sale, and but for the dawn of something like real principle in him, he would often and often have abandoned his task altogether and sunk into utter idleness. There was a certain amount of cleverness and energy in the man's nature,

but very little patience or perseverance, and no one knew what an effort it was to him to keep on at the same sort of work day after day. He was in a certain way his own master, and could smoke his pipe when he liked, and choose his own dinner, and talk big when he had a mind, but otherwise he sometimes thought during the hours he sat alone, after the school had reopened, that he couldn't have been much worse off in the workhouse, where at least he would have had "company." He never felt this, however, in the evenings; the very sight of Dulcie cheered him, and her good looks and cleverness were sources of great delight to him, though he was rather jealous of the lesson-books over which she pored, and often would have made her idle if he could. She was sure that she had been right in refusing the Farmers' offer to let her still live with them, for though she could then have looked in upon her father once a day, she would really have had but little time to spend with him, after the holidays were over, and he would almost certainly have found his way to the nearest public-house in search of company. But things that are right to do are not always pleasant, and when she came home tired with school-work, and with difficult lessons of her own to learn, it was sometimes very hard to give any of her mind to the

basket-weaving, or to talk in the sprightly way which her father loved. She had explained to him often that she had to learn as well as teach, and that success in her calling depended on her passing satisfactorily the examinations which lay before her ; but he never seemed thoroughly to take this in, and would interrupt her with questions just when she was most absorbed. Sometimes she was tempted to give up her ambition and settle down to something lower, but she could not have left her father to go to service, was not old enough to get a good engagement as shopwoman, and had no natural turn for dressmaking or millinery. Besides, there was nothing that so brightened up her father as her fancy pictures of their life together when she should be a schoolmistress, and they should have a pretty cottage all to themselves, with roses round the door, and a gay little garden with a rustic bench in it, where he should sit in the sunshine.

"You shan't have any more of these baskets to weave then," she would say ; "I shall be able to keep you and myself too, and you shall be so comfortable." Whereupon George would smile, and reply with a half sentimental air, "Your lamented mother used to tell me you would be a comfort to me some day," and Dulcie would feel very happy and quite encouraged to persevere.



CHAPTER IX.



DULCIE was not left without sympathy in her difficult life. Miss Harding and Mrs. Farmer had always a kind cheering word for her, and the latter was constantly mending or making clothes for both her and George, inventing little excuses for giving her useful presents, and bringing round "just a bit of something hot" for their dinner, or a home-made cake for their Sunday tea.

If George could have walked as far as the shop he and his daughter would often have been invited to dine there on Sundays, but it was all he could do—when he called himself *well*—to get as far as the grand old Parish Church, which was about midway between the two houses. His hobbling gait was painful to him even when he had the help of Dulcie's arm, and he grew so soon tired that this Sunday church-going was a greater effort than any one suspected.

Very strange he felt when he first found himself inside the walls of a church ; he had never

entered one since childhood except on the occasion of his marriage (not even on the day when his little girl was christened), and though he could read he had no more idea how to find the places in his Prayer-book than if he had been a baby. The first time he went he was so pleased with himself for having made such an effort to please Dulcie that he expected all sorts of thanks and praise from her in return, while she, poor child, was so overwhelmed at having seen the school children all stare their hardest at him as he went up the aisle that she was obliged to struggle hard with herself before she could express anything like satisfaction. She was sure that two of the pupil-teachers who sat near her had nudged each other when he fluttered the leaves of his book in a vain effort to find the Psalms, and she even fancied they had exchanged a smile when she leant over and found the place for him. In his Sunday best he looked very different from the wretched object that had been brought to the school door, but Dulcie had a miserable consciousness that all the teachers and all the children knew the truth, and she had perceived, or imagined she perceived, a difference in Miss Adams's manner to her ever since that day. The mistress had not judged the girl harshly for her behaviour on that occasion, but

she had felt that she had been mistaken about Dulcie's origin, and was a little disappointed to find that her favourite teacher was not really "that nice Mrs. Farmer's" niece, but came of a lower stock. "I shouldn't wonder if she had gipsy blood in her," the mistress said to herself now as she looked at Dulcie's beautiful dark eyes and the brown cheeks, with their quickly-kindling colour; somehow this made her a little less confident about her favourite's future; but Miss Harding, on the other hand, was more hopeful and thankful with regard to Dulcie than she had ever been before. She had admired the way in which the child had shaken off the slough of ignorance and slovenliness and natural violence, and had developed into a well-instructed, well-mannered, self-controlled maiden, but a vague fear had haunted her that there were other motives at work besides the best and highest ones, and that Dulcie was beginning to take pride in herself and to look down on everybody who was not "superior." Now that she saw her humbled, and battling with those habits of pride which made the humbling so painful; conscious of her father's low repute and low tastes, yet dutifully anxious to stand by him and to hide his failings from others; content to slip out of her adopted place and be poor once

more, yet not laying aside the worthy ambition to win an independence for herself and raise her father with her—she felt that there was reason indeed to believe that He who had begun a good work in Dulcie would perfect it, and that the girl would grow into one of those rare women who are felt to have conquered self even in its innermost entrenchments, and whose lives have an influence for good upon all around. She did not contradict when Dulcie said, "It's very bad of me, I know, to feel so downhearted, and so impatient sometimes," nor did she say one flattering word, but she encouraged and cheered, and helped the girl to see all that was hopeful in her father's case while yet leading her to feel that she must not expect too much from him. George never seemed to care for Mrs. Farmer, kind as she was, but he had a great admiration for Miss Harding, and was more willing to receive instruction from her in religious matters than from the vicar. She visited him frequently through the autumn, with the clergyman's full approval, and they had quite long conversations together, sometimes partaking of the nature of friendly argument. These always took place in Dulcie's absence, and her father never repeated to her what passed, but she generally found him better for the visits, though occasionally they

left him very thoughtful, and gave rise to such ejaculations as these, "Well ! if ever there was a person who made you feel downright uncomfortable about yourself it is that 'ere lady friend of yours, Dulcie." After which, however, he would add, "And yet she's as good company as any one I ever set eyes on."

Dulcie had been confirmed in the spring, before her father's return, and was now a communicant. Her Communion was a wonderful help to her, and she had set her heart on her father becoming a communicant too, and was greatly disappointed that the vicar would not urge it. He could not fully explain to *her* how much reason he saw for delay, and how anxious he was to test by time whether George's apparent reform sprang from a real repentance, or merely from lack of pressing temptation and desire to escape the workhouse. When Christmas Day came she felt it very hard to have to draw near the Holy Table *alone*, though it was some comfort that her father was with her at Morning Prayer, and seemed to enter very heartily into the service. They were to dine with the Farmers afterwards, for in honour of the day good Mrs. Farmer had insisted on having a fly to meet them at the church door and take them on to the shop, and was going to

send them home in the evening in the same comfortable way.

It struck Dulcie that her father looked very pale and feeble as she helped him into the fly, and she felt bound to ask him if after all he would not rather go home, though it was a great relief to her when he answered decidedly, "Oh no, no, we are expected ; when we get in by the fire I shall feel all right." She felt very pleased that he should be received in her adopted home on a friendly footing, and that Mr. Farmer should see how different he had become, and she was looking forward, as was natural, to a nice cosy chat with "aunt" after dinner while the two men should be smoking their pipes together. It was seldom that she had the chance now of a nice comfortable talk ; her life was such a busy one, and so absorbed by her father, that she scarcely ever had leisure even to *think* of any enjoyment for herself.

It was bitterly cold weather, so the brightly blazing fire in Mrs. Farmer's parlour was a pleasant sight, and under the influence of that and the good Christmas dinner, George seemed to revive, though there was a certain constraint about him, and an absent look in his eyes which made Dulcie feel vaguely uneasy. Was it only that he was thinking of past times, when the

shoemaker—now so kind in his dry way—used to survey his flashy costume with silent contempt, and answer his most elaborate speeches with an incredulous grunt?

Dulcie was having her talk with Mrs. Farmer apart, when John suddenly called to his wife to come to him. She ran to him at once, followed by her visitor, and they found him standing in front of the arm-chair in which George Ward was seated, peering anxiously into his face and trying to feel his pulse.

"I didn't take no notice," he said, "when I first saw him lay his head again' the side o' the chair. I thought he was goin' to take a nap; but look at him, he's stiffened like. Seems to me Dulcie had better run for the doctor, she'll go faster than I can."

Dulcie had her things on, and was away down the street almost before another word could be uttered; she felt sure that her father had had another "stroke," and the Farmers were disposed to think so too. They put his feet up on a chair and applied a hot bottle to them, loosened his neck-tie, and began to sponge his face and hands with vinegar and water, but he showed no signs of reviving, and while they ministered to him they consulted together in whispers as to what could be done.

"'Tis something more than a faint, for certain," John said, "and 'twasn't likely either he should faint just after dinner. However shall we get him home?"

Mrs. Farmer half opened her lips to speak, then hesitated and put up an inward prayer, then spoke bravely out, though with a little tremble in her quiet tones.

"John, dear, there's that room of Dulcie's, it's all straight but just the bed, and I could have the sheets down and air them in no time. We couldn't turn him from our house and he dying most likely?"

It was said like a question, but John at first answered only by one of his old grunts.

"'Tis the third stroke that most often finishes people, they say, and this is only the second," he remarked, presently. "Women are always for rushing into things without considering of them all round. Where's the *girl* to sleep? You can't send her away if you keep him; and if he's laid up long in this house, who's to take the expense? We couldn't ask for charity for him and he in our own house."

"No," she said, "I feel it's undertaking a good deal; but I can manage, dear, so that you shan't be put about by it; if he gets better he might be moved after a bit, but I couldn't bear

to send him away now, and him so ill. It seems as if he was took bad here *on purpose* that we might see to him."

"He'd have done better to stop at home such a cold day as this," said John, drily, but he was chafing one of the stiff cold hands very tenderly all the time, and his wife felt that she should prevail.

"I said to him when he came," she answered, "'Why, you do look ill. I'm a'most sorry we tempted you to come out.' And when Dulcie had gone to take her things off he told me as he'd felt queer ever since he got up, but he wouldn't say anything to her because he wanted her to have a happy day of it. I think it's wonderful how he's improved, poor fellow! I never thought I could have liked him as I do."

"He didn't leave off his way of life till it left off *him*," said John, sourly; but Mrs. Farmer knew by experience that he often made a harsh speech just when he was going to do a wonderfully kind thing, and so she felt encouraged to produce what seemed to her the best argument of all.

"You take the sponge, dear," she said, "while I run and fetch the sheets. He that they wouldn't make room for in the inn will send you

a blessing this Christmas Day if you make this poor soul welcome for His sake. His *dear* sake," she added, more softly still, and then a tear fell from the kind eyes, and the homely face seemed to John for the moment "as it were the face of an angel."

"There's no going against her when she speaks like that," he said to himself, and he gave in.

George Ward was nursed long and tenderly in that house, and Dulcie came home that Christmas Day never to go away again. Her father rallied to a certain extent, and recovered both consciousness and speech, but not the use of his limbs; he was completely bed-ridden, and the attempt to earn his own livelihood had to be given up. He had enough good feeling to say that now that he could really do nothing he must make up his mind to the workhouse; but Mrs. Farmer shrank from sending him there quite as much as Dulcie did, and for their sakes, and that Higher Sake which appealed to all that was best in John's nature, the shoemaker suffered him to remain. He felt it a little hard to have to spend his earnings on "a chap like that"; and the "chap," on his side, felt it hard to be indebted for his maintenance to a man whom he had all along respected, but never quite liked or understood; yet the burden, when

once accepted, did not in reality press very heavily on either. John was much too noble-hearted to cast up Ward's helplessness to him when they met, and George was by no means incapable of gratitude, and would never let his host leave the sick room without assuring him once again that there was nothing like adversity for showing one the worth of true friends, adding sometimes in the fervour of his feelings, "I never knew what real goodness was till I knew you and your good lady. Maybe I should have acted very different if I had made your acquaintance sooner."

This was the nearest approach to a penitent speech that the poor man ever made in John's hearing; but Dulcie and her aunt became more and more convinced that he was sorry for all that had been wrong in the past, and was trying now earnestly to do right so far as he knew how. He was learning to take his illness from God's Hand, and not to grumble or swear at its many inconveniences; and he was so much more considerate about his child than he had been at first, and so anxious not to hinder her advancement, that she grew to think him the best and tenderest of fathers, and wondered how she could ever have had a bitter feeling with regard to him. His old companions, who had

occasionally though rarely visited him in North Street, never came after him now, and being thus completely withdrawn from all bad influences, he seemed to open his heart more freely than before to the good influences around him. The vicar became thoroughly satisfied about him, and, to Dulcie's great joy, was able to lead him on to be a communicant before many weeks were over. He was so ill at the time that it seemed as if his first Communion would also be his last, but it was not so. He lived till Whitsuntide; and one day in the Whitsun week the blessed Feast was again spread in the sick chamber. He was wonderfully well that day; no one then thought the end close at hand, but it was; two nights afterwards he passed away in his sleep.

Dulcie, while thankful for this gentle end, grieved at first that there had been no leave-taking, no last words; but by-and-by she came to think that what he had said to Mrs. Farmer when she bade him good-night had been meant as a farewell, though at the moment they had almost thought him "wandering."

"I shall tell my poor wife," he had said, "what you have done for me, and for our girl; and if Miss Harding comes to-morrow, you can give her my respectful compliments, and say I

bless the day when I sent my Dulcibella to her school."

Poor little "Dulcibella"! she was seldom to hear that fine name again, for she was "Dulcie" always to her friends, and ere long "Miss Ward" to most of the outer world. Few who knew her in the after-days would have believed that she had had but a narrow escape from a life of ignorance, and perhaps of sin, and yet the respect which she inspired was not due to any claim of superiority on her own part. She never forgot the humbling lessons of those months that had followed her father's return, she was a softer and a gentler and a sweeter woman for what she had gone through at that critical time. The village school-house, with the roses round the porch, was never hers, for she first became *infant* schoolmistress in the great big town where most of her life had been spent, and then after a while succeeded Miss Adams in the charge of the girls' school. John Farmer died soon after this, and then Dulcie moved into the rooms adjoining the school, and took Mrs. Farmer with her. They clung tenderly to one another as of old, and nearly everybody but Miss Harding firmly believed them to be aunt and niece, though once a small child, with a love of the marvellous, caught up something of Dulcie's

early history, and electrified her school-fellows by telling them in a loud whisper that "governess" used to run about in rags when she was little, and had actually been sold to a circus! A shocked pupil-teacher called "Miss Ward's" attention to the children, but Dulcie only smiled. "Well, suppose I was," she said; and indeed it would have taken a great deal more than that to shake her pupils' allegiance. Those who have learnt to rule themselves can rule others; there has never, perhaps, been a mistress better loved and better obeyed than Dulcie Ward.

THE END.

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